

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE FARMERS' MOVEMENT, 2020–2021

Edited by
Shamsher Singh and Sabah Siddiqui



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In the annals of India's history, a monumental uprising unfolded in 2020, echoing the resilience and coming together of large sections of its agrarian base. Instigated by the contentious farm laws of 2020, the Farmers' Movement burgeoned into a year-long saga of protest and perseverance, ending only in December 2021 after the passing of the Farm Laws Repeal Bill, 2021 by the Indian Parliament. From the initial demand for law repeal to the multifaceted growth of the movement, the book traces the journey of the Farmers' Movement, as each essay dissects the socio-political dynamics, cultural nuances, and mass solidarity that underpinned the protests, including focused analyses from Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom. This anthology chronicles the ebb and flow of a nation's spirit, encapsulating the symbiotic relationship between theory and praxis, between change and continuity. It serves as a testament to the power of collective resistance and a roadmap for future struggles, ensuring that the legacy of the Farmers' Movement endures beyond the pages of history.

This volume is an interdisciplinary project and will be of interest to scholars from diverse fields such as economics, sociology, public policy, political science, history, political geography, gender studies, cultural studies, international studies, architecture, media studies, psychology, and ethnomusicology.

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Shamsher Singh
Sabah Siddiqui



Debanjan Roy

1 Why do we need a people's history of the farmers' movement?

Shamsher Singh and Sabah Siddiqui

The tractor march towards Delhi on November 26, 2020, and then again on Republic Day, January 26, 2021, is an image burned into the national psyche: thousands of tractors driving in tandem on the highways and roads that lead to the national capital city, and reclaiming the meaning of the “republic”; flags of red, yellow, green, and blue fluttering in the wind; and men, women, and children making their way to stake their claim on the political consciousness of the world's largest democracy. The farmers' movement against the three farm laws lasted over a year and was the largest and longest rural struggle in the recent history of India involving hundreds of thousands of active protesters occupying the borders of the political centre, New Delhi. As the seasons changed in the year, the protesters changed and evolved their strategies of resistance towards both nature and political establishment. The anti-farm law movement that comprised hundreds of big and small farmer organisations supported by workers' and trade unions all across the country delivered a major setback to the neoliberal agenda, making this movement a significant development in the history of people's movements in the country. The task to chronicle this historical moment must involve recording and comprehending this immense victory of the common masses. This is the task this volume sets out to do. It puts together a people's history of the movement that privileges the standpoint of the protesters. It lends an ear to the voice of the protesters in their individual difference and collective consciousness, and maps the contours of the ground of their struggle. A people's history as a history from below foregrounds the narratives that get lost in official historical times (for a detailed exposition of the method of a people's history, see Samuel, 1981). Furthermore, it seeks to develop a historical narrative that is difficult to absorb, to co-opt, and to corrupt by those in power. As a method that originates in Western theory, it adapts well to address the archive of and for the people of the Global South, and within the south, the stories and perspectives of those located on the margins of society. The idea behind this volume was born in the process of documenting and archiving the events and development of the movement (this documentation is now available as a public repository at People's Archive of Farmers' Protests (pafp), 2022 (*pafp.in*). There emerged various media reports, commentaries, and other writings

during the course of the movement; however, there remains a lack of an all-rounded assessment and understanding of this dynamic movement. This volume strives to bring together accounts of the micro-processes witnessed in the progression of this multifaceted struggle. With the ending of the protests and the dismantling of the protest camps around Delhi, at dozens of toll plazas in Haryana and Punjab, and other protest sites in different states in December 2021, this edited volume collates and tries to comprehend what happened on the ground across different regional contexts with an interdisciplinary approach. It engages with prominent cultural resources, socio-political processes, activism, and religious practices that sustained the protests. It speaks to and speaks of the wide-ranging actors, varied interests, and creative energies that went in the making of this movement. It explores the symbiotic relationship among theoretical positions, mobilisation strategies, and cultural processes in the making of a mass movement, and the dialectical relationship of change and continuity at the grassroots. This is the method of a people's history developed in the process of the writing of this book.

The genesis of the anti-farm law movement

The introduction of the policies of liberalisation and globalisation in the 1990s marked the integration of Indian agriculture in the international agri-trade. Opening up of the agriculture sector under pressure from international organisations (particularly the World Trade Organization) to integrate the peasantry of the Global South into the accumulation logic of global capital has made the Indian peasantry more vulnerable. These policies have also entailed another dimension – the withdrawal of state protection mechanisms and institutional support for farmers, resulting in deepening of the crisis in the agriculture sector. This crisis which was brewing in the countryside over many decades received some attention as reports of falling farmers' incomes, increased indebtedness, and farmers' suicides started surfacing from different parts of the country. The disastrous neoliberal reforms have been aggressively pushed by successive regimes.

There exists a vast and rich literature on pre- and post-independence peasant movements in India. This body of work covers a diverse array of perspectives and provides in-depth understanding of these movements in different phases (e.g. Dhanagare, 1975, 1983, 2015; Gough, 1974; Hasan, 1989; Mukherji, 1998; Mukherjee, 2004; Roosa, 2001; Sen, 1972). These documentations serve as useful resources in understanding the politics, processes, and historical conditions that underlay peasant revolts and movements in the country. In addition to this, these accounts help in making sense of ideologies that articulated, cadre that organised, led, and sustained these movements, and the larger impact they left on the political outcomes.

In recent decades, there have been sustained struggles by the peasantry, tenants, *Adivasis*, and Dalits against land encroachment, depletion of natural resources, displacement, and widespread exclusion from welfare mechanisms

under the neoliberal policy regime. Formation of the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) in the aftermath of the police firing on farmers in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh (Pandey, 2017; Mukherjee & Mohan, 2023), and the *Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan* (BAA) against the Land Acquisition Amendment Ordinance in 2015 were important developments in intensifying grassroots struggles and campaigns in the form of *kisan jathas* (farmers' march), *mahapadavs* (temporary protest camps), *gheraos* (sit-ins) of government offices, *gramin bandh* (rural strike), and *padyatras* (marching on foot) on issues of land, water, minimum support price (MSP), debt-waiver, housing, MGNREGA, and forest rights. Many of these struggles have resulted in victories. Opposition to the Land Acquisition Amendment Ordinance (2015) was one of such instances where hundreds of organisations came together to oppose the legislative intervention (see Dhawale, 2022; Mollah, 2016). It is important to note that these united actions across states on a range of issues prepared the ground for the anti-farm law movement. These struggles have brought farmer unions and other organisations of the rural sections together and helped in forging issue-based unity as was seen in the anti-farm law movement.

The Union Government on September 27, 2020, promulgated the three farm laws, namely, the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and one amendment, the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020 (hereafter, farm laws). The laws were first brought in as ordinances, which is an extraordinary legislative measure adopted by the governments in case of an urgency in the absence of a parliament session in process, on June 5, 2020. This legislative intervention by the Indian state in the form of the three farm laws was designed to fundamentally change the terms of production, trade, procurement, and stocking to benefit the big corporates (Krishnamurthy, 2021; Lerche, 2021; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2022; Singh, 2020).

The manner in which the farm laws were pushed through in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic without holding any discussions and consultations with the farmer organisations left them feeling disenfranchised in policy deliberations. It was not only the content of the laws but also the way in which they were enacted that fuelled farmers' agitation. The anti-farm law movement could mobilise different strata of the peasantry and landless wage labourers under one platform by fostering issue-based unity to protect the land, livelihood, and food security from corporate encroachment. This collective opposition received consistent support from the central trade unions, various employees' federations, professionals, and urban middle classes.

The anti-farm law movement impacted different aspects of agrarian society, and at the same time, different sections of society played a role in sustaining these protests. While the agitation began with the demand to withdraw the farm laws, there was both spatial and thematic growth during the course of the protests, turning it into a broader mass movement. The movement

did not restrict itself in narrow identities of religion, region, ethnicity, or caste even though the visuals, symbols, and institutions of Sikhism were prominently present. The movement successfully withstood the attempts of vilifying the protesters as the state-sponsored propaganda machinery tried bracketing the protests to specific socio-religious, class, and parochial identities. This narrative was actively countered not only by the diverse leadership of the movement but also through grassroots processes and mobilisations. In fact, many religion-specific practices, for example the *langar*, gained a wider acceptance as a secular practice as the term became a common nomenclature for serving food at the protest sites as well as on the highways en route the Delhi borders without necessarily adhering to a religious format (see Abbi, 2022; Singh, 2022). The well-documented mingling of cultures, languages, participation and solidarity cutting across classes, and diverse ideologies and regions turned the movement into a people's movement. An important development for the anti-farm law movement was the creation in early November 2020 of a joint platform of farmer organisations, *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (hereafter, SKM), to lead the agitation. SKM comprised more than 400 farmer organisations and represented tens of millions of farmers all over the country.

Introduction to the volume

The chapters in this volume bring to our attention two facets of the movement: firstly, they document and elucidate the dimensions of the struggle between the large sections of peasantry on one hand and the government on the other; secondly, they do not let the conflicts between different classes and social divisions in the countryside disappear while underlining the emerging solidarities during the movement. Intersecting themes addressed in this volume comprise the theoretical and empirically informed perspectives from during and post-movement phases. The book locates this project between theory and activism to put forward a rounded analysis of a significant phase in the agrarian history of the country. The analysis takes into account classical debates and literature on social and new peasant movements to understand the possible impact on the theoretical framework of agrarian question in India. Interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary analyses provide methodological and theoretical strengths to different chapters with expertise from scholars based in departments of economics, sociology, history, political geography, anthropology, literary and cultural studies, political science, law, architecture, and psychology. Focused and targeted analyses from regional sites such as Delhi borders, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and the Sikh diaspora in the UK have brought out regional diversity in the experiences, complexities emerged, and role played by institutions such as caste, *khaps*, religion, trade unions, political organisations, musical and theatre groups, civil society, and voluntary organisations in sustaining the movement.

Zoya Hasan provides a succinct overview of the farmers' movement as it unfolded, starting from August 2020 and extending till November 2021 till the rollback of the three agri-laws by the Prime Minister in a televised address to the nation. In the genesis of the protests, she provides the ways the three laws were introduced without following the due process at the level of the highest policy-making body of the country – the Parliament of India, and how the laws were interpreted and deconstructed by farm unions. The chapter presents the major events of the protests, which will be elaborated in detail within the chapters to follow. In foregrounding the conflict and confrontation between the protesters and the state over this period, this chapter explores how the protests have strengthened democratic action and people's movement in two ways. Firstly, Hasan reiterates that protest actions were decided in a collaborative model under the direction of the SKM and that all official actions adhered to constitutional principles and methods. Secondly, by taking to the street, to highways and toll plazas leading to the capital city of India, the protesters were able to experience and reinforce their claim on the nation. Thus, while a robust grammar of protest was being written into existence, the movement presented an exemplar of democracy trumping authoritarian practices. The victory of the movement was a complete repeal of the three agri-laws and the assurance by the government to compensate the families of the more than 700 protesters who lost their lives in the sit-in agitation. Hasan presents the analysis that the farmers' movement demonstrates once again that a functioning democracy requires to institute more than an electoral majority in the government. It also requires making space for a participatory polity that can take a dissenting position to the state, thus constructing the possibility of a two-way dialogue between the state and the public. Thus, she concludes that the movement's victory is a victory for democracy itself.

The agrarian question in India has been a matter of serious scholarship and debates. Historically, political mobilisations under peasant struggles have played an important role in understanding and approaching the agrarian question. Shamsher Singh and Paramjit Singh in their chapter present an analysis of the developments in the post-1990s that have had a significant impact on the debates on the agrarian question in India. They suggest that owing to the remarkable and multifaceted mobilisations that took place during the course of the anti-farm law movement, it is important to analyse the class character of the movement and mobilisations that took place. The chapter argues that while there is no doubt that the anti-farm law protests saw rich and large peasantry who represent the land monopoly dominant groups in the countryside came on roads to protest, it was the small, marginal, and middle farmers who formed the backbone of the protests which received sustained support from the landless rural workers, trade unions, and other strata of society. The demand of withdrawal of the three farm laws was a commonly agreed demand among the more than 400, small and large, organisations across the country with a diverse socio-economic membership

base and differing ideologies. It was this coming together of large sections of masses that delivered a blow to the imperialist neoliberal corporate agenda at least for the time being by forcing the union government to withdraw the farm laws. While strictly ascertaining the fact the movement against the farm laws was not without its own contradictions and fault lines, that is the primary contradictions existing in the rural society and agrarian structure were visible inside and during the course of the struggle, the authors underline that the joining of the movement by the rural labourers along with a large majority of marginal, small, and middle peasantry, not only symbolically but also actively on the ground, has created a united opposition to the agenda pursued by the ruling regime. This development provided an opportunity to forge solidarities and alliances between different sections of people on a broad range of issues encountering contemporary India.

It is not always that movements based on specific demands concerned with a particular sector become mass movements. It is not just the populist nature of the movement merely due to the leading actors but due to the cause of the movement and how it is seen by the larger sections of society. The movement in the process accommodates and brings under its ambit progressive forces while shedding any sectarian and narrow considerations. A large-scale wider participation of the masses belonging to different sections of society is ensured by successfully appealing to them through the non-sectarian and broader considerations. This is not only the requirement of the movement but also the transformation it achieves in its course of struggle. The anti-farm law protests while primarily situated on border points – Singhu (on National Highway 44); Tikri (on National Highway 9); Ghazipur (where farmers from Uttar Pradesh joined); Shahjahanpur Kheda (on National Highway 48), where farmers from Rajasthan joined; Palwal (on National Highway 2), where farmers from Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh put up their tents; and Dhansa-Badli (close to Gurugram), where farmers from southern Haryana started a protest site by January 2021 – penetrated into the rural areas of northern India and eventually into other parts of the country as well. These protests provided heft and unity to smaller but important state-level struggles, resulting in victories that strengthened the unity of the protesters and organisational strength of the farmers' movement in India as a whole.

Ashok Dhawale and Amit Narkar draw from the rich history of farmers' and peasants' protests – the Satara parallel government against the British rule from 1943 to 1946, the Warli *Adivasi* uprising from 1945 to 1947, and the Shetkari Sanghatana led agitations of the 1980s and 1990s – to the popular *Kisan Long March* of 2018 and provide insights into the mobilisations against the three farm laws. Based on an insider's perspective as an organiser and leader, the chapter provides a snapshot of the popular and successful peasant mobilisations which had an impact not only on the politics of the state but also across the country. They, through the documentation, present a timeline of how farmers' mobilisation in the state of Maharashtra, while

directed by calls given by the SKM, developed their independent character across the state. From some of the important protests like the vehicle rally from Nashik to Delhi, two massive *Kisan Mahapanchayats* in Mumbai, to very local programmes like the women farmers' conference and *Kisan Bagh* in Pune, the Maharashtra mobilisations saw a variety of forms of protests. While these solidarity actions helped build momentum across the state and ensure large-scale participation at the Delhi borders, they also underline how there emerged a unity and coordination between various organisations of farmer, labourer, and urban and rural poor across the state. The mobilisations against the farm laws since the beginning were carried out in the state; for example in response to the AIKSCC's call for a nationwide *Rasta Roko* on September 25, 2020, over 35,000 peasants at 83 centres in 23 districts of the state blocked national and state highways followed by a successful general strike across industrial centres of Mumbai, Pune, Nashik, Aurangabad, Nagpur, and Solapur on November 26. The details and descriptions of these protest actions from the state build an important case for understanding the dynamics of farmers' mobilisation in a historic and contemporary context and how a state far off from the epicentre of the protests became an integral part of the movement.

Balwinder Singh Tiwana situates his analysis through a historical political economy critique of the major developments that have taken place over the last half century in rural and agrarian sectors in the state of Punjab, which provided a leading role in the anti-farm law protests. The historical militant peasant mobilisations in the first half of the 20th century resulted in land and tenancy rights for peasants. These struggles laid the foundations for many upcoming agitations in post-independence Punjab. The chapter describes how the capitalist penetration during the Green Revolution in agriculture led to a change in the character of the agrarian politics in the state with the rise of various factions of the *Bhartiya Kisan Union* (BKU). The author notes that while some of these organisations raised issues concerning the large and capitalist farmers, there were a few BKU fractions along with left-affiliated farmer organisations that focused on the mobilisations of small and marginal farmers. After the passing of the Agri-Ordinances in June (2020), through several months of campaigning against the bills by more than 30 farmer unions of the state, there emerged a larger unity and coordination among them resulting in intensifying the protests at the grassroots, ultimately merging with the all-India protests led by the AIKSCC. Tiwana observes that the protests were able to mobilise small, marginal, middle peasantry along with rich and large peasantry supported by agricultural labourers, artisans, and salaried households from rural and urban areas; however, there existed a differentiated experience of participation across these classes. The chapter underlines several challenges for the agrarian politics in the state in times to come and how there is a need to broaden the scope of these mobilisations by raising issues of the rural workers in general and migratory labourers in particular.

Mahabir S. Jaglan and Rajeshwari in their chapter use socio-spatial approach, an approach that has been lacking in the existing scholarship on anti-farm law protests, to describe the unfolding of the farmers' agitation in the state of Haryana, which was the closest location to the major protest sites on the borders of the capital city. By using a wide range of methods and sources, the authors elaborate on the politico-geographic, economic, and social factors that worked behind the evolution, spatial diffusion, and sustenance of the year-long struggle in a state marked with socio-political and regional complexities. The chapter brings out the role played by a range of socio-political institutions such as farmer unions, *khaps*, mass, and civil society organisations in spatial diffusion and decentralising the agitation by occupying the highway toll plazas in the northern, central, and western parts of Haryana. Provoked by the derogatory statements of the ruling party leaders, the call to their boycott changed the nature and form of the protests, resulting in agitations sweeping across from the north to west, and consequently shifted the epicentre of the agitation from the northeastern region to the central (Jind district) and western parts (Hisar district). Broadly, the protest-landscape of farmers' movement in Haryana was defined by the action space (protest sites), the areas protesters belonged to, and the intensity of their participation. The chapter explains the regional differentiation in participation by farmers across the state; several factors such as the level of agricultural productivity, cropping pattern, and agricultural marketing system played a role in determining the intensity of the protests. The authors argue that the cropping pattern of north Haryana has the dominance of paddy and wheat, with much higher agricultural productivity than the mixed crop areas of south Haryana except Palwal district. Furthermore, having a greater surplus quantity of tradable agricultural commodities and beneficiaries of paddy and wheat procurement on MSP, the thought of dismantling the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) *mandis* and procurement system was scarier for the farmers of north Haryana than the fellow farmers in the south. The chapter notes the role played by the *khaps* which came in support of the protests after their constituents – the Jat peasantry – joined the movement in large numbers. This boosted the participation of farmers in the *khap*-dominated areas in the east-central, central, and western parts of the state. While discussing the refreshing phenomena of women's participation in the protests, the analysis points out that there existed again a regional variation in this participation which can be explained by the difference in the share of labour participation in agriculture by women across different regions in the state.

S. Mohanakumar, Sanjay Madhav, and Prem Kumar's chapter describes the mobilisation of farmers in the state of Rajasthan who were forced to set up *dharna* at a Shahjahanpur-Kheda border site of Rajasthan and Haryana while the protesters were on their way to Delhi. The challenges of this rather neglected and less talked about protest site are discussed.

The Shahjahanpur–Kheda border protest site was situated in the closest proximity of the pro-ruling party region of the state of Haryana. This important political dimension made the conditions more hostile towards the protesters, leading to the lack of local support that was available at other border protest sites around Delhi. The chapter discusses how these challenges were met by the farmer organisations and how in the due course of the agitation there developed several channels and platforms that bridged the gap between the protesters and the locals. The chapter narrates the processes of solidarities and support extended by the *khaps* from the neighbouring districts of Haryana, the Mev community of Mewat region, and the gurdwaras of Kota, Patiala, Pokaran, and Ghadsana to sustain the movement for a year. The Shahjahanpur–Kheda border protest site also had communally polarised surroundings given the proactive notorious right-wing groups and cow protection committees who invariably target local Mewati farmers. The farmers' protest during its course involved a number of local activists who had been working in the region for communal harmony and brotherhood. The farmers' movement played an important role in countering this communal hatred and polarisation and building a larger unity among the farmers of this area.

Sudhir Kumar Suthar, Ankit Singh, and Lokesh Swami in their chapter on farmers' mobilisation at the Shahjahanpur border and in the state of Rajasthan argue that a unique combination of three elements – identity, organisation, and technology – was behind these mobilisations. Negotiation among various farmer groups for identity or organisational question wasn't taking place in a unilinear fashion with any prior consent. Instead, these questions were continuously being negotiated and renegotiated. The process of unity formation along with contestations and negotiations was visible at the Shahjahanpur border. The difficulties in theorising the anti-farm law mobilisations are that the mobilisations carried a diverse set of farmer unions with differing base, agenda, and politics giving rise to tensions among them, so theories of farmer mobilisation need to focus on this everydayness of interaction, contestation, and negotiations between the state agencies, family members, or unions. The chapter underlines that the farmers from Jat Sikh and Jat caste groups were the major participants in the protests belonging to two economically and agriculturally advanced districts – Sri Gangana-gar and Hanumangarh – of the state. The differences in overall development levels and agricultural infrastructure within the state of Rajasthan played an important role in intra-state differences in mobilisation pattern, which is also reflected in the historical presence of farmers' mobilisations over the last few decades in these districts. The chapter notes the dynamics of unity and disagreement between different shades of farmer organisations and outfits affiliated with the Left, Indian National Congress (INC), and others having a diverse socio-economic support base.

Socio-political developments in western Uttar Pradesh, which was another strong centre of the farmers' movement, are discussed by Vishal Singh Deo

and Akram Akhtar Choudhary. The chapter traces the relationship among *khap* institutions, BKU, political parties, and Jat and Muslim peasantry from a historical perspective and brings out the complexities of the ever-changing dynamics between them. Making use of scholarly literature, local media reports, interviews with peasant union cadre, and rich documentation of the sectional violence, the chapter discusses how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made inroads into the socio-political landscape of the region dominated by the popular agrarian mobilisations by using fissures in inter-*khap* relations and by heightening an anti-Muslim narrative over the last decade. The rich analysis in the chapter helps understand the decline of the agrarian mobilisations, weakening of the BKU (Tikait) and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), marking a rightward shift in peasant politics giving rise to the Hindutva forces in the backdrop of an intensifying agrarian crisis. An insightful discussion on the developments to the run up to 2022 state legislative elections in the state shows how the farmer agitation offered the BKU an opportunity to push back against the BJP's dominant position in the region by adopting a strategy of reconciliation with the Muslims to revive its waning fortunes. Deo and Choudhary bring out the counter-processes adopted by the ruling party in the state to break the emerging alliance against it which posed a threat to its electoral victory in the region. These counter tactics were a combination of IPC, legal enactments, and the vigilante ecosystem comprising a network of several right-wing groups made popular through social media platforms. By presenting a detailed analysis of the electoral outcomes, it has been argued that while the SP-led coalition made significant gains by doubling its tally from the last time, delivering a serious blow to the BJP, primarily due to the Muslim voters rallying behind the SP-RLD alliance, the BJP still registered a rise in vote share among the Backward, Dalit, and dominant caste groups. The slender margins of victory of the Mahagatbandhan candidates were a result of the historic consolidation of the Muslim votes that overcame caste and class locations to support the Mahagatbandhan. The chapter argues that fears of similar consolidation of votes by the Muslims in other poll-bound states set off a new wave of attacks to disenfranchise and punitively fragment the Muslim vote.

A populist movement may attract masses purely on emotional and sentimental grounds without engaging with the broader political process. However, the farmers' movement went beyond the populist shell and placed the political question of the rural and agriculture sector in contemporary India front and centre. The participation of different institutions and processes developed a symbiotic relationship with the movement and made it more dynamic. As an example, the participation of women in the cultural domain that is primarily dominated by male performers made the space within the movement more inclusive and democratic while politicising the cultural production, its agents, and the audience. The same process was observed between the institutions such as *langar*, diaspora, media and IT, and popular culture.

Pritam Singh uses a general and specific approach to narrate the forms in which the UK diaspora responded to the farmers' protest. The chapter

describes a range of institutions, platforms, and mechanisms that were initiated by the Sikh diaspora to mobilise direct and indirect support in favour of the protests by organising rallies and protest marches and extending technical, professional, academic, and intellectual support as well as material and financial resources needed to sustain the protests. Terming some of the gatherings in the UK cities as historic, the author points out the massive spread of the solidarity protest actions across countries such as the USA, Canada, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, and Australia. These diasporic mobilisations were critical in providing the protest of the Indian farmers international coverage and visibility and also in mobilising political support from the parties in the West where the Sikhs are an influential force. The descriptions in the chapter highlight an important dimension of the expansion of the protests. It shows how some resources and infrastructure such as the *langar*, classes run for school-going children, and libraries put in place with the active contribution of the diaspora at the protest sites were not only for the protesters but were also used by the local residents and visitors at the protest sites. This helped in preparing a wider ground of solidarity among the wider sections. Singh points out another important contribution made by diaspora academics who had their roots in rural society and farming. These academics led the intellectual critique of the farm laws and exposed the larger economic and political rationale behind these by using their reach at the international level. Protest music became another important medium of cementing these ties between the protesting farmers, singers, and the diaspora, especially the teenagers and youth who got involved in composing and singing songs around the issues of the farmers. A larger and long-term positive outcome and by-product of the diasporic involvement in the farmers' movement is the deepening of ties of the Sikh diaspora with their homeland state Punjab in a multidimensional way.

Sabah Siddiqui and Sarabjeet Dhody Natesan turn their attention to the daily practicalities of food and water that sustained the protesters for more than a year on the roads and highways. They shore up the significance of the *langar*, or community meals, in the mass management of the farmers' movement that was brought to the borders of Delhi by the Sikh and Punjabi farmers, and adopted and supported by farmers of Haryana. The authors adopt a narrative approach, as agitators were interviewed in the aftermath of the success of the movement, that is as participants and protesters had disbanded the border camps and other protest sites and returned to their homes in Punjab and Haryana. Thus, the chapter treads the path between a 500-year-old cultural and religious practice among the Sikh Panth of cooking and sharing food, and a secular and political mobilisation that is going head to head with global capital in contemporary times. The authors turn their focus to analysing the politics of food, or the ability of food to signify meaning across social structures. The community kitchens were supported by the popular sentiment brought by Sikh participants that a *langar* cannot fail, that is it must feed as many people for as long as required. As the protest extended

over a year, the fervour of the protestors to keep the *langar* fires burning was also undefeated. The chapter brings out narratives of how protestors organised different facets of the *langar*, from organising the collection of raw materials to sharing of labour in cooking and cleaning. In the process, the *langars* had to plan for the supply of water or the disposal of waste materials. The chapter also looks at *langars* that ran at protest sites other than the border camps, such as those along the highways of the roads leading from Punjab to Haryana, and toll plazas that were another site of action. It examines how medical issues popping up during the duration of the year required the planning of medical *langars* and that despite the norm-breaking character of both protests and the Sikh *langar*, there were gendered differences in the running of the *langars*. In conclusion, the chapter tries to offer an analysis of how the enterprise of running the *langars* that works with both religious and political imagination produces a vision for the support of mass mobilisations that must borrow from local contexts and respond to global challenges.

Vaidehi Lavand, Onkar Khebudkar, Ninad Revatkar, and Ramiya Gopalkrishnan look into the protest architecture and processes of re-appropriation of space by the people at the Tikri border protest site. The chapter describes the Tikri border protest settlement site as a symbol of people's voice, collective identity, memory, and representational spaces and how the temporary settlement with built and un-built spaces along the NH 9 became a symbol of permanence and endurance on ground. The discussion provides insights into how while striving for sustaining in the extreme weather conditions and unpredictable political developments there emerged, organically, linear, scattered, and clustered settlements to meet the basic necessities of the protestors. As the struggle prolonged, these temporary settlements became a symbol of common collective consciousness, reclaiming public spaces and acting as magnets of mobilisation and contestation during the protest. The chapter makes use of a wide range of resources such as interviews, newspapers and journal articles, GIS mapping, artwork, photographic documentation, and on-site observations to present a lively portrayal of the evolution of the border protest site. This temporary settlement was a product of the public space created and re-appropriated by the people in the process for a cause of social reform. The central focus of the chapter is how people's participation in the actual construction of temporary shelters defined and shaped the overall pattern of the settlement. It tries to explain how people's architecture with a collective cause could be expressed in such a vibrant space. Overall spatial organisation in the settlement pattern and flexible temporal spaces can be utilised as shelters for a longer period of time enduring or sustaining the protest. Making an inventory of spaces and elaborating the observations based on spatial expression of the settlement, the paradigms and meaning of organisation and support mechanisms are discussed.

Harinder Happy and Shivam Mogha in their chapter highlight the role played by the diaspora sitting at a "distance" and being "outside" of the movement in creating the media networks and IT platforms to propagate the cause of the

farmers' movement. The chapter brings out the processes and mechanisms that went into initiating and building the *Kisan* IT Cell to counter the maligning narratives of the state, the ruling party, and their propaganda. The authors, through participatory and action-oriented research, employ Chomsky's propaganda model of media and showcase how the farmer-centric media and IT cell emerged as alternative platforms in opposition to the corporate-controlled and pro-government media. The chapter shows the repressive tactics used by the state machinery to suppress the spread of information among the protesters and wider masses through a series of Internet shutdowns, bans, and blocking of digital platforms such as "*Kisan Ekta Morcha*" and "Tractor to Twitter". Talking about the factors that played a role in the emergence of the IT infrastructure within the movement, the chapter provides details on the coming together of the skilled volunteers from varied backgrounds who became an important medium to communicate among the farm unions, protesters, sections of the middle classes, civil society, and diaspora population. Several farmer unions and solidarity groups also developed their own social media wings with dedicated teams and volunteers who became part of the larger information and propaganda drive in favour of the demands of the agitation. The fascinating story of the print media called *Trolley Times*, run by a group of dedicated student and youth volunteers, marks a great significance in building alternative media to focus on people's issues especially in times when the mainstream media play a divisive role.

Kopal works on the intersection of art and agency in writing about the cultural production of protest songs at the Badowal toll plaza. While Punjabi music has been looked at and analysed from a variety of angles, within the farmers' movement and without, considerably less has been produced about Haryanvi music, and even less about songmakers in their social and gendered situatedness in Haryana. This chapter seeks to address the lacuna by firstly locating itself in the theoretical framework of social movement studies. Furthermore, it takes an ethnomusicological approach to look at how songs were created, performed, and understood by its makers, and highlights how the amateur songmaking by the ordinary participants became part of the collective action repertoire of the farmers' protest actions. The author describes the space and organisation of the *dharna* in which the songs were shared and performed, thus adding to the description of the toll plaza as a kind of protest site. She takes care to introduce the participants to locate them in their socio-cultural context and analyses how the farmers' agitation allowed for the democratisation of the space of protest, as well as allowed the move from occupation (participation) to performance (presentation). This chapter is significant in foregrounding women's participation in this cultural production, both as participants in the public arena of the stage at Badowal and as farmers with equal stakes in sustaining the social movement. Thus, the author demonstrates that in coming into the public sphere, and becoming both songmakers and performers, cultural and psychological shifts were underway in the participants. In addition to the gendered nature of this analysis,

this chapter demonstrates how cultural production, and in particular music, allows for the creation of assertion in protesters from all social classes, a feature that is characteristic of social movements from below. It creates the ground for the emergence of new subjectivities and a positive feature of the farmers' movement.

Prateek's chapter seeks to understand the various functions of the protest songs produced in the course of the farmers' movement. The chapter argues that hundreds of songs that were released in support of the farmers' demands worked as an effective mass medium to communicate the directions given by the farm unions, thus politicising the common people, especially the youth, in a popular style. The chapter analyses the questions of identity and politics among the Jats of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh separately and traces the common threads that bound them together during the year-long movement. A prominent feature of the protests was the active and key participation of musicians, artists, songmakers, and other cultural agencies. Through a historical analysis of the peasant identity in the northwestern regions of India and its caste background, the chapter shows that Jat peasants who were at the core of this movement used their caste and peasant cultural identity in making protest songs. The author argues that one of the outcomes of coming together of singers and songmakers from different states of these regions was the formation of a formidable unity among the Jats of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan for the first time in history. This overarching similarity and sense of belonging also reflected in the protest songs of the movement. The chapter underlines the production strategies that used inspiring and spirited lyrics, moving visuals, and relatable content in the songs to motivate the larger masses to participate in the movement. The music created in support of the farmers' demands fulfilled this task to a great extent. The use of platforms such as YouTube and social media provided a massive reach to the artists across different states to connect to a large audience to encourage them to participate in the struggle and create solidarity networks worldwide. The active use of social media and other digital platforms proved to be an important tool in the hands of the singers and artists to increase their reach and connection with the audience beyond physical borders and constraints. Presenting a detailed visual and content analysis of the protest songs, it notes that the picturisation and visual aspect of these songs were vital in expressing the sentiments and articulating the arguments of the movement.

The literature on social movements is an important repository to know why and how the movements emerge and they form the basis to develop a critical theoretical understanding of issues, interests, actors, and methods integral to the movements. This volume makes an attempt to provide a people's history, a recounting of the events from sites and spaces in which the movement was engendered, to a people's movement. The book is a confluence of different analyses of what transpired in the farmers' movement.

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Debanjan Roy

2 Farm protests take the country by storm

Zoya Hasan

Indian farmers mounted a major protest in 2020–2021 against three contentious farm laws designed to liberalise and corporatise agriculture, which the government claimed would overhaul the agricultural sector and benefit the farmers. Beginning November 2020, tens of thousands of farmers camped at Delhi's borders, awaiting the repeal of the new agricultural laws that they rejected outright. This protest represents a significant moment in the history of mass mobilisation in India; it was a major step towards challenging corporate dominance and divisive politics that have characterised India for the last few years. It was one of the largest protests in scale and participation since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power and it won a major victory against the government.

Farm protests articulated public discontent with the new agricultural policies inspired by the neoliberal model, which have intensified inequalities and disparities and aggravated the agrarian crisis. Government thought that the huge protests would fizzle out in due course. But the farmers' resolve and the widespread public support garnered by them led to a different end result this time. Both sides refused to compromise for months before the government unexpectedly conceded to their demands to withdraw the farm laws. It was a rare mass protest that succeeded in forcing a government that does not tolerate dissent and quickly punishes opponents to back down. How and why did this unexpected outcome transpire?

This chapter will examine the nature, politics, significance, and the response of the regime to the farmers' protests. An overview of the protests will be followed by an exploration of how the farmers' protests challenged government policy through both its substantive demands and its democratic modes of organising. This was done in two distinct ways. Firstly, the groups spearheading the farmers' movement reaffirmed their faith in egalitarian politics by adhering to constitutional principles and methods. Secondly, these were occupy-type protests which took place on major highways and public grounds occupying public spaces and highlighting how the new laws undermine broader economic and political rights. This created a new grammar of protest outside institutional spaces reinforced by their refusal to disband protests until the laws were repealed.

Genesis of the protests

The farming sector drives the Indian economy. It employs a large share of India's workforce. Around half of the total workforce depends on agriculture, and two-thirds of the population (and 70% of rural people) depend on farm incomes directly or indirectly for their livelihood, although the sector accounts for only about 15% of the country's economic output. That reliance increased after the coronavirus pandemic sent millions of labourers back to their villages. Public investment in agriculture has long been declining, farmers' incomes and returns on investments have been falling, and indebtedness has increased (Ghosh, 2020). Debts and bankruptcies have been driving farmers to high rates of suicide (Guha & Das, 2022). This laid bare the crisis of Indian agriculture across the country.

Amidst a fraught agrarian environment, in 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised to double farm incomes by 2022 by offering minimum support prices (MSPs) for produce sold to the public food procurement agency that would be 50% above total cultivation costs (Hindustan Times, 2018). This would mean a rural family's income would have to grow about 10% a year in real terms. This promise was not fulfilled, and in fact, farmers are now worse off than before. Farmers felt betrayed as many of them expected these promises to be fulfilled as they had voted for the BJP and contributed significantly to its election victory in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections. But the government did not keep its promise; in fact, farmers received prices that were lower relative to the prices they had been getting under the previous government (Himanshu, 2019). Several of the other promises to the agriculture sector also *turned out to be hollow*, further eroding farmers' trust in the administration.

In June 2020 amidst growing concern over the deepening economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic that had broken out in March that year, the BJP-led NDA government promulgated three ordinances on agricultural marketing that would result in a fundamental reorientation of the existing regulatory framework of Indian agriculture. The three laws concerning the pricing, sale, and storage of farm products were passed by the parliament in September 2020. These are Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020; Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020; Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020 (Narayanan, 2020).

Farmers opposed these changes and began a massive protest against the "black laws" as they called them, which would reshape the food procurement and distribution mechanisms, minimise the government's role in agriculture, and pave the way for commercialisation of agriculture, adversely affecting producers and consumers to the benefit of big companies. Farmers, already overwhelmed by debt in the past decades, would need to compete in a market that favours corporations (Behl, 2022). It would entail a breakdown of

the procurement system, which currently guarantees farmers an MSP which provides them with some basic protection; its removal would eliminate the regulatory support with little chance of gaining non-agricultural livelihoods (Mashal et al., 2021).

The ruling party argued that deregulating agriculture will increase productivity and double farmer incomes; it would liberate farmers from wholesale markets by allowing them to sell directly to private corporations and bring private investment and growth. But it failed to convince farmers, who saw the laws as a ploy to turn over farmland and markets to corporate interests, undermining their ability to make a living. They believed it would exacerbate their hardship and leave them at the mercy of corporates, with little bargaining power against them (Kumar, 2021).

A closer reading of the three laws makes it clear that the apprehensions of farmers were well founded as these laws clearly favoured corporate control of the production and distribution of the food crops. This was evident from the refusal to legalise MSP and deregulate hoarding of essential commodities including processed food items (like rice) and allowing trading including electronic trading permissible anywhere without tax. This will give private business free reins to engage in large-scale trading and stocking of agricultural produce. This scenario is apparent from these laws: one of the laws relaxes restrictions governing purchase and sale of farm produce; the second relaxes restrictions on stocking under the Essential Commodities Act (ECA), 1955; and the third introduces a dedicated legislation to enable contract farming based on written agreements (Narayanan, 2020).

The farm crisis was provoked by the way the farm laws were passed hurriedly by the government through the ordinance route. The measures seem to have been drafted in secret and then hurriedly pushed through both houses of the parliament without adequate scrutiny and debate (Acharyulu, 2021). They weren't discussed or debated in any meaningful and sustained way with the groups that stand to be affected by them (Narayanan, 2021). Pleas for consultation were brushed aside before the ordinances were converted into laws by short-circuiting established processes and voting procedures (Jebaraj, 2021). It was passed by voice vote in the Rajya Sabha in complete disregard of the demand of several members of the House for actual physical voting, as prescribed in Article 100 of the Constitution, which states that "all questions at any sitting of either House or joint sitting of the Houses shall be determined by a majority of votes of the members present and voting". Even the Supreme Court, while dealing with the petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the farm laws, observed that no consultation had taken place with farmers before framing the legislation (Sahu, 2021). Moreover, these laws were passed without consulting state governments, which are responsible for agriculture under India's Constitution. Passing laws without consultation with the states is completely unsuitable to a federal democratic polity such as India.

This highhanded approach was compounded by the manifest indifference to insecurities produced by the pro-corporate tilt of the impending reforms. The result was widespread resentment across the farming belt of northern India. The haste and the breadth of the changes involved acted as a trigger for the protests. It was deliberately passed amidst the pandemic lockdown to prevent protest. But this did not dampen or prevent protests.

Inclusive protests

The protests began in August, escalated in September 2020 in Punjab in the north, and spread to other states in India by December. Political parties were not associated with it, although some parties extended support. Farmers relied instead on alternative forms of organisation, including labour and farmer unions, student unions, community leaders, and civil society. It was led by the *Samyukta Kisan Morcha*, a coalition of more than 40 farm unions formed in November that year to organise the protests. A nationwide solidarity strike was held on 26 November in which thousands of people participated. This was followed by a march to Delhi that brought out tens of thousands of farmers from the northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan to the borders of Delhi to start an indefinite sit-in in the capital against these laws. The central government and the Haryana and Uttar Pradesh governments made every attempt to stop the protesters from proceeding to Delhi. Prevented from reaching Delhi, they camped at the Singhu and Tikri borders on the outskirts of the capital, and Uttar Pradesh farmers set up another protest site at Ghazipur (Kumar, 2021). Between 200,000 and 300,000 farmers had converged at border points on the way to Delhi (Mahajan, 2020). They set up a protest city equipped with community kitchen, laundry services, and portable toilets. They carried food, water, bedding, and other provisions for a long sit-in until the repeal of farm laws and stayed at the protest sites braving scorching heat, a bitter winter, and even a deadly second wave of COVID-19. In addition, they had also organised direct actions such as blocking railways, shutting down government buildings, and forcing open toll plazas.

Much like Occupy Wall Street (2002) and Shaheen Bagh (2019–2020), farmer protesters created a new grammar of collective resistance outside institutional and political party spaces. They adopted modes of protest rooted in wider democratic principles and practices. All decisions were made collectively in coordination committee meetings and daily meetings, determining everything from the distribution of hygiene products to the speakers at daily assemblies to participation in talks with the government (Behl, 2021). The collective resistance provided a vision of democracy rooted in a radical egalitarianism (Behl, 2022). These practices arose not from any inherent bond “but rather from a will to form new relationships through the demonstration itself” (Sonkar, 2021). The inclusive forms of organisation and participation demonstrated the possibility of more equitable democracy (Ibid.).

Support across classes and regions

The farm protests were dominated by farmers from Punjab. For them, the protests were part of a much longer history of farmers' struggle in the state. They opposed the pro-corporate farm laws from the moment they were passed in September 2020 (Sinha, 2020). While Punjab farmers and Sikh farmers in particular were undoubtedly present in large numbers at the protest sites, this was not just a Punjab movement. It received support from farmers of other states and from farmers' unions and trade unions across states. The agitation saw an overwhelming participation of women and socially diverse groups of farmers not bound by caste, religion, and geography. As in Shaheen Bagh and the anti-CAA protests, women were a noticeable presence in these protests. Men and women shared responsibilities in the camps. Women were driving tractors, participating in the *langar* kitchens, and delivering speeches on stage. This big protest, although geographically located on the city's outskirts, articulated demands that found a sympathetic response all over the country, as is evident from the simultaneous kisan marches in Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and elsewhere. Together they mounted what has been described as the largest and longest farmers' protest in the world (Bera, 2020). They remained on the makeshift border camp for more than a year.

A massive protest rally in Muzaffarnagar, the Muzaffarnagar Kisan Mahapanchayat, on September 5, 2021, in support of the farmers' agitation illustrates the scale of popular support. It drew half a million farmers from across many states in India. Roads in a 20-km radius around this Uttar Pradesh town were choked with tractors and farm vehicles. More than 500,000 farmers attended the rally, according to the local police. All of Muzaffarnagar town was flooded with farmers – some social media posts called it a “sailab” (flood) (Hasan, 2021a). This was the biggest rally yet, and perhaps one of the biggest ever, in the farmers' struggle against the farm laws.

Beyond farm laws

What really united the farmers was the fight against big capital and corporate interests, and the potential collapse of the public distribution system (PDS). Farmers felt the government was listening to big capitals and not to them even when they felt threatened by the new farm policies. However, they raised issues of sectors beyond agriculture, turning it into a fight against the pro-business agenda and the violation of civil rights and liberties (Sainath, 2020).

Big capitals close to the regime were the target of open attack, exposing the cozy nexus between the capitals and government. The farm unions claimed that the state was catering to the interests of two of India's wealthiest families, Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Industries and the Gautam Adani conglomerate (Vishwadeepak, 2020). They called for the boycott of Reliance and Adani products through social media, slogans, speeches, posters, and bumper stickers. Farm unions criticised the sale of public sector units, roads,

railways, and electricity to the private sector. “We have to stop the country from getting sold. The banks are being sold like the Food Corporation of India (FCI) land is being given to Adani. The ‘Sale of India’ boards have been put up and the purchasers are Ambani and Adani”, said a *Bhartiya Kisan Union* (BKU) leader. Likewise Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Bharat Petroleum Corp Ltd (BPCL) are in “danger”, and it’s important to activate resistance and build solidarities to save these national assets.

Apart from opposing wholesale privatisation of the public sector, farm protests went far beyond these issues: they defended secularism, democracy, and the Constitution against attempts to undermine it. They were concerned about the consequences of majoritarian politics, which was increasing polarisation and exacerbating divisions. Their leaders called for Hindu–Muslim unity to counter the politics of hatred and division between castes and communities and appealed to farmers to inflict “vote ki chor” (electoral defeat) on the BJP for creating divisions in society and polity. Peace, harmony, and solidarity were the hallmarks of the farmers’ discourse. Farm leaders underlined their commitment to inclusive politics to counter communalism and divisiveness.

In brief, the farmers threw down a gauntlet to the ruling party – the protest would no longer be only about the repeal of the farm laws, which had triggered anger in the first place. Several speeches mentioned this signalling a widening of the farmers’ discourse to key national issues that matter in Indian politics today. Their position was bolstered by a massive churning at the ground level shored up by the support of an assembly of classes, castes, and religions. This was a situation the government had not bargained for when rushing through the farm laws.

Blocking protests

The central government was unmoved by the unprecedented protest. It initially ignored the protesters, before claiming that they were being misled and manipulated by malevolent opposition forces. The ruling party claimed that there is a sinister design by anti-national elements to infiltrate the movement (Jodhka, 2021). It dismissed the protests as expressions of the disgruntled opposition which is unable to accept the popular mandate and the popularity of its prime minister. Pliant media and social media trolls were unleashed to attack the protesters and dissenters (Sainath, 2021).

The regime at the centre tried to deal with the farmers’ protest much the same way as it has dealt with all protests during its term in office (Hasan, 2021b). The majority in parliament was enough, and those who questioned them either were brainwashed by sinister forces or didn’t know better. Protesters were demonised as adversaries, alleging that they were funded by Sikh separatists (Werleman, 2021). The word Khalistan was invoked to convince people that these protests were not about farm laws but actually about destabilising India (Scroll, 2020). Senior ministers and the army of trolls tried to paint them as puppets of the Left or Khalistanis, pampered tractor-borne elites stalling reforms (Sharma, 2021).

Internet services were blocked, protest songs on YouTube were removed, and Twitter handles of those critical of state excesses were blocked (Time, 2021). While marching to Delhi, farmers faced police barricades, water cannons, and tear gas shells. Every effort was made to prevent them from assembling. On Republic Day, January 26, 2021, a small section of protesters entered the Red Fort in Delhi, and they went on to break barricades and fly a Sikh flag from the ramparts of the Red Fort. This was followed by a police crackdown on the protesters. Huge police deployment was used to stop them from entering the national capital by barricading, putting up fences, installing nails, to restricting movement and preventing people from reaching the protest site (BBC News, 2021). Trenches were dug on the roads to try and block their tractors. However, farmers breached the barricades and blockaded roads and highways with tractors. The intensity of the protests meant that they could not be suppressed.

A young climate activist Disha Ravi with ties to Greta Thunberg was arrested on sedition charges by falsely accusing her of having employed a toolkit for hatching an international conspiracy to support the farmers' movement and defame India (Goyal & Pandey, 2021). Similarly, the ridiculous response to global pop star Rihanna's six-word tweet in support of the protests and the full-scale kerfuffle over it show how intolerant the government was about these protests. No government has gone this far as to erect iron spikes to stop protests.

A similar treatment had been meted out to the anti-CAA protesters. But this time it did not gain the same traction as the demonising of Muslims during those protests (Arora, 2020). The divide-and-rule tactics in the name of nation or religion didn't work as it had with the anti-CAA protests. Despite these manoeuvres, it was difficult to neutralise and contain the protests (Joshua, 2020). The big difference this time was that unlike the protests against the CAA, the government was willing to negotiate with farmers' representatives. A ministerial panel held nine rounds of negotiations with the farm leaders. The government was willing to accommodate changes and make adjustments within the laws but was opposed to any repeal of the laws. The government blinked and, after the ninth round of dialogue, offered to keep the new farm laws in abeyance for 18 months. But the farm unions were unwilling to settle for anything less than complete repeal (Bajwa, 2021).

Farmers' triumph

Once the farmers had demonstrated that the time and effort spent in trying to discredit them had not worked, the government changed its position. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on November 19 that his government would repeal the laws. In a televised address, he acknowledged that his government had been unable to convince farmers of the advantages of the laws and said: "We have failed" (H. Sharma, 2021). The government also agreed

to provide compensation to the families of the nearly 700 farmers who died during the protest (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Protesting farmers insisted on maintaining autonomy from political parties and did not allow party leaders to speak from their platforms. However, some opposition parties, especially the Congress and Left parties, backed the protests across the country. But it was not the support of parties but the tenacity of the agitating farmers that forced the ruling party to retreat and also the fear of electoral reversals in the upcoming state assembly elections. Through the year-long protests, the farmers remained steadfast in their demands. They stayed put at five different locations on the Delhi border. The perseverance of the protesters ultimately prevailed. It forced the government to climb down and concede their main demands – repeal of the three laws and MSP. The repeal was a vindication of mass mobilisation against a powerful government, which for months was insisting that its “reforms” would benefit farmers but had to yield. Farm protests ended only after the repeal of the three farm laws that were set to significantly privatise Indian agriculture. The agitation showed how a peaceful and democratic protest could challenge the might of the state.

This was a rare climb down, perhaps the most significant in the face of the incredible resoluteness shown by the agitating farmers after one of the most prolonged periods of protest ever recorded in India or anywhere in the world. Farmers’ protests successfully challenged a legislation at the very heart of the government’s ideology. The protests were a key factor of resistance to government policy that could feed into and form the basis for electoral and political change.

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Debanjan Roy

3 The anti-farm law movement and the agrarian question in India

Shamsher Singh and Paramjit Singh

Introduction

The introduction of neoliberal policies in the 1990s has had a significant impact on the debates on the agrarian question in India. This shift in the policy regime and the opening up of the agriculture sector for global competition have given birth to new contradictions in the countryside, popularly known in academic circles as the new agrarian question. In a broader perspective, the new agrarian question refers to the policies and efforts by the international institutions (particularly the World Trade Organization (WTO)) to integrate the peasantry of the Global South into the accumulation logic of global capital.

The legislative interventions by the Indian state in the form of the three farm laws brought in as Ordinances in June 2020 were a major intervention to transform the terms of production, trade, procurement, and stocking to benefit the big agribusiness corporate capital. Had the laws been implemented, there would have been an overhauling of the critical aspects of Indian agriculture, which so far have had provisions of protection of farmers' interests (Krishnamurthy, 2021; Patnaik, 2020; Rawal et al., 2020).¹ The likely disastrous implications of these developments rallied the large sections of peasantry and working masses, including the rich peasantry which realised the severity of these laws for their economic and political positions in the countryside against the authoritarian corporate alliance in India. There emerge important questions about how the character of the anti-farm law movement of 2020–2021 should be understood and factored in while discussing the agrarian question – an issue that has remained more or less undiscussed in the existing literature on the movement.²

There seems to be an agreement that the movement successfully delivered a blow to the imperialist neoliberal corporate agenda, at least for the time being, by forcing the union government to withdraw the three farm laws. While there is no doubt that the anti-farm law protests saw rich and large peasantry who represents the land monopoly dominant groups in the countryside come on the road to protest, it was the small, marginal, and middle farmers who formed the backbone of the protests which received

sustained support from the working classes and other sections of society. Owing to the remarkable and multifaceted mobilisations that took place during the course of the anti-farm law movement, many have noted the larger solidarities or coming together of a varied range of identities such as caste, class, gender, religion, and political ideologies (see Jodhka, 2021; Kaur & Saratchand, 2022; Krishnan, 2022; Kumar, 2021; Mogha, 2021; Sangwan & Singh, 2022; S. Singh, 2022; Singh & Ram, 2022). However, given the class dynamics, these solidarities have their own complexities and require a closer scrutiny and a class-centric analysis. Here, we explore how the large-scale mobilisations of various sections of the rural masses and prominent socio-political processes that unfolded in the movement impacted the class relations and contradictions of the Indian countryside and subsequent implication for the agrarian question in India.

The objective of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, to put forward an understanding of the classical agrarian question and how neoliberal capitalism has impacted this question. This has been discussed within the framework of imperialistic accumulation through the imperialistic efforts to integrate the agriculture sector of India with global capital. It has been argued that there is a need to maintain the balance between this new agrarian question and the class-centric agrarian question. Secondly, by using archival material and interviews with left farmer leaders, it examines the significance of the anti-farm law movement to challenge neoliberal capitalism through cross-class alliance that emerged during its one-and-half-year-long course. We explore the forms, mechanisms, and potential of the cross-class and caste-alliance in realigning the forces at the grassroots to take on the existing and newly emerging contradictions of the Indian countryside. It also explores the concerted efforts and symptoms of the revival of class-centric worker–peasant alliance in the movement that can play an effective role in resolving the agrarian question, especially from the left agrarian organisational stand point. The central issue in our discussion is to understand how left politics sees the resolution of the agrarian question, especially in the backdrop of the historic victory of the movement and the celebrated development of worker–peasant unity.

Part I

Agrarian question and neoliberal capitalism

The agrarian question may be defined as obstacles to radical changes or advancements in the mode of production inside and outside agriculture. The unresolved agrarian question is the main characteristic of the backwardness of an economy. In classical Marxist literature, the agrarian question was seen as a question of transition from backward feudal, semi-feudal, or peasant agriculture to advanced industrial agriculture. In a broad sense, from the reading of Kautsky, Lenin, and Preobrazhensky, the classical agrarian question is associated with the primitive accumulation for capitalist and socialist industrialisation through rural/agricultural changes. Kautsky

(1988, p. 12) defined the agrarian question as being “whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionising it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones”. However, as Marx (1976, p. 876) argued, “the history of this expropriation assumes different aspects in different countries and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession and at different historical epochs”. Hence, there is no uniform path through which capitalist social relations of production establish their command over agriculture. As per classical formulation, the development of capitalism in agriculture would result in the dissolution of the small peasantry and polarisation of rural society into two classes: agrarian bourgeoisie and rural proletarians. Among the two paths of agrarian transition discussed by Lenin, the first case was that the feudal landlord economy slowly evolved into the bourgeois, Junker landlord economy, where landlords became capitalists. In “[t]he second case there is no landlord economy, or else it is broken up by revolution, which confiscates and splits up the feudal estates. In that case, the peasant predominates, becomes the sole agent of agriculture, and evolves into a capitalist farmer” (Lenin, 1972, p. 238).

However, many third-world countries of the Global South failed to break the land concentration through effective land reforms and revolution. The agrarian question in those third-world countries is somewhat strange and more complex than the classical agrarian question. There are two sets of obstacles to the resolution of agrarian question in third-world countries. The first is the extraction of surplus by imperialist industrial capital from third-world countries and the persistence of unequal exchange during the neocolonial phase. The second is the lack of effective concentration and centralisation of land and other resources in the countryside.

In a capitalist or pre-capitalist form of exploitation of the rural poor, the significance of the agrarian question from a Marxist perspective lies in forming an agency that has the potential to free the rural poor from dual exploitation – imperialist exploitation and domestic capitalist/feudal exploitation. The fundamental issue for the rural poor is to form a class alliance for a progressive transformation of production relations in agriculture and the socio-economic conditions in the countryside (Ramachandran, 2011). The success of the 2020–2021 anti-farm law movement in India is significant from many perspectives as noted by scholars referred to earlier in this chapter, among many others. It is important to note that the resolution of the prolonged agrarian crisis and, ultimately, the agrarian question requires a sustained movement that develops an alliance of the large majority of the peasantry and workers.

Rationale for new agrarian question

The new agrarian question is associated with consolidating the peasant path as a solution to food insecurity, climate change, and the security of livelihood of rural majority in the Global South. Marxist scholarship argues

that the alternative solution proposed by the imperialist organisations (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and WTO) in the form of contract farming, corporate agriculture, free market in agricultural production, monopoly rights of natural resources to Transnational Corporations (TNCs), etc., cannot emerge as an effective solution to resolve the agrarian question/crisis in countries of the Global South. It does not mean giving up the role of industrialisation altogether for the resolution of the agrarian question but rather giving up unpopular and militaristic industrialisation in terms of monopoly capitalism (Moyo et al., 2013). Hence, the important aspect of the new agrarian question in India is the arrested development of Indian agrarian capitalism under imperialism.

The new agrarian question is an outcome of the new developments that have been underway since the 1990s in the countries of the Global South. The widespread introduction of neoliberal policies has led to the integration of their economies and agriculture sector into the accumulation logic of global capital (Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2010). The introduction of neoliberalism in India has led to fundamental changes in the objective conditions of the countryside. The retreat of the state from welfare measures in general and the decline of public investment for agricultural development, removal of subsidies, price support, rolling back of procurement, and opening up of the agriculture sector to the world market, in particular, have resulted in catastrophic consequences for the peasantry as a whole (Patnaik, 2006; Patnaik & Moyo, 2011).

The three farm laws were an attempt to implement the imperialist vision of modernisation of agriculture, which has destructive implications for farming and the working rural population. This vision is based on the big family farming, large-scale corporate agriculture and agribusiness model of North American and Western European countries. Even in developed countries, despite the efficiency of this model due to superior technology and large-scale cultivation, the agricultural family unit, as highlighted by Amin (2012), is only a subcontractor, caught between upstream and downstream activities: on the one hand, agro-industry and finance, and on the other, the traders, processors, and commercial supermarkets. Moreover, the capitalist agriculture of North America and Western Europe is highly mechanised, just employing tens of millions of farmers (less than 10% of the total population). Is it possible to superimpose the same model in India, where 58% (around 800 million) of its rural households still depend primarily on agriculture for their livelihood, with 82% of farmers being small and marginal? In the absence of comprehensive labour-intensive and independent national industrialisation, this imperialist modernisation project of the agriculture sector would have displaced millions of rural workers (particularly peasants) with some thousands of new modern farmers producing under a contract of giant TNC's rendering the remaining surplus workers (P. Singh, 2022).

Besides, the WTO's agenda to treat agriculture and food production similarly to other production operating in an open market has serious consequences for the farming sector of India. Except for some rich farmers in the

Green Revolution zone of India, most farmers are in a competitive disadvantage due to the small size of holdings, pre-capitalist peasant production, poorly mechanised agricultural operations, poor rural infrastructure, low level of agricultural productivity, etc. Under such circumstances, implementing a general rule of modernisation of agriculture through an open-market trading system dominated by big TNCs through agro-input and agribusiness monopolies would have been a massive blow to small-scale family farming in India.

This new phase of imperialistic accumulation through the imperialistic efforts to integrate the agriculture sector of India was expressed by Patnaik (2008, p. 108) as “accumulation through encroachment”.

Why is class-centric agrarian question important?

Like the peasant movements of the 1990s, in the recent farmers’ struggle of 2020–2021, the issue of class contradiction and exploitation of the rural poor by the internal dynamics of capitalist production structure has not gained much space. However, the 2020–2021 movement was a significant challenge to the repression of working people by the authoritarian neoliberal state. It has played a significant role to make the farming classes and rural poor aware of the state–corporate nexus and new challenges, such as land grab, food insecurity, and ecological and livelihood crisis (McMichael, 2009; Weis, 2007). This shift in the centre of the agrarian question, as pointed out by Bernstein (1996, 2006), is due to the increasing globalisation of agricultural production and markets along with the growth of productive forces in the agriculture sector on capitalist lines in developing countries of Asia and Africa. However, some scholars (e.g. Lerche, 2013) argue that the shifting emphasis of Marxist scholars to the whole peasantry and pauperisation in general under the neoliberal phase of capitalism seems to break from the classical Marxist perspective on the agrarian question. The departure from the analytical position of the classical approach to agrarian question to the challenge posed by global capitalism has undermined the importance of peasant political agency and modes of production debates among Marxian scholarship.

The pointing out of the inadequacy of the classical agrarian question, or the path of capitalist transition in the agriculture sector of developing capitalist countries by Bernstein (1996, 2006) and Byres (2003) was taken by academics and agrarian populists as rejecting class analysis as a mode of investigation and class conflict as a focus of the agrarian question. The classical processes of peasant differentiation are still ongoing in many regions of India. In the face of these developments, there is a need to keep the Marxian class analysis alive and vibrant. The farmers’ movement also needs to be continually and carefully investigated through the Marxian class analysis to understand the internal dynamic of agrarian change.

The ingredient that most sharply distinguishes the Marxian class analysis from other traditions is the conception of exploitation-centred analysis of the

capitalist system (Wright, 2005). The emerging nature of the agrarian question in neoliberal India has been characterised by nearly frozen differentiation and polarisation of peasant classes (Harriss, 2013). The fundamental question is: has peasant differentiation been superseded by peasant pauperisation in India? As far as left politics and activism in India are concerned, the classical Marxist perspective (Kautsky & Leninist) believes that class analysis and peasant differentiation is an important aspect of understanding the agrarian question. It does not mean to negate the role of imperialism in shaping the agrarian structure of India.

In both respects, we cannot deny the importance of rural class structure and exploitation of the small peasantry and rural poor by the capitalist production relations and finance capital through various interlocked transactions. The treatment of internal contradictions within the existing agrarian structure is equally important while struggling against corporate and imperialist intervention in the agriculture sector. Some regions in India (Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh) are agriculturally dynamic, with better resource endowment and developed productive forces (Singh & Singh, 2020). After the introduction of the Green Revolution in the 1970s, the accumulation process in the above regions was largely driven by modern methods of cultivation. The rich capitalist farmers represent the wealthy section of the rural community in these regions. Although this class constitutes not more than one-fifth of the total rural population, due to their predominance in possession of land, agricultural machinery, and other means of production, it is the master of the countryside. It not only is economically powerful but also enjoys sufficient political power to supplement its economic dominance (Tiwana & Singh, 2017).

The all-pervasive proliferation of capitalist relations in agriculture of Green Revolution regions, as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) Study Group report (2016, p. 33) on Agrarian Classes highlights, requires the principle of “seek truth from facts”, which has been a hallmark of the agrarian studies of classical Marxism and beyond. One of the crucial questions for the Indian left is a very basic and political one that concerned Engels (1993) at the end of the 19th century – the question of what kind of alliances needs to be formed in a country with a large peasantry.

Part II

Neoliberal capitalism and cross-class alliance

The farmers’ mobilisations in the 1970s and through the 1980s were led by the sections of the rich peasantry and capitalist farmers who were the beneficiaries of the Green Revolution technology and infrastructure. Hasan (1989, p. 2668) notes, “The agrarian politics and movements of the last decade can be seen as the result of political mobilisation of self-employed

middle peasantry or ‘bullock capitalists’. The argument is that the middle peasantry gained prominence since 1971–1972 through the changing balance of power in the country-side. The middle peasants have emerged as the dominant group both in terms of numerical preponderance and area controlled”. The economically and politically upward mobile farmers of these regions came to dictate terms and exercised dominance in agricultural policy in the post-Green Revolution decades. The issues of exploitation of tenants, small peasantry, and agricultural labourers were no longer the central concern of agrarian question in India (Mukherji, 1998). The farmer mobilisations as pressure groups led by the rich peasantry and capitalist farmers then experienced an overall decline in the national politics and negotiations with the state during the post-1990s’ policy shift.³

The question of building resistance to the imperialist neoliberal agenda in the agriculture sector is an important one and requires working out alliance formations based on an assessment of the emerging contradictions and possibility of different classes joining hands to safeguard their interests. While the question of alliance formation in this resistance is of a strategic nature, it is of an ideological nature too and should be sensitive to the existing class antagonisms in the society. Political Resolution of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) (2022) adopted at the 23rd Congress notes, “New class conflicts have emerged during the course of this struggle, between the big bourgeoisie in collaboration with international finance capital and the entire peasantry, including sections of the rich peasants” (p. 58). The resolution further notes, “Such possibilities for advancing the class struggle have emerged with the growing coordination between the working class trade union movement, the peasantry and the agricultural labour. Such developments began much earlier and since 2018 made significant advances through joint movements of these sections. This growing unity in struggles must be strengthened further in the coming period” (p. 59). At the grassroots, the mobilisations in the Indian countryside are more diverse and intersectional in comparison to the 1970s and 1980s era. There has been a change over the last few decades in the character of the farmer unions and organisations in the country. A number of factors, for example, fragmentation of land holdings, penetration of democratic processes at the grassroots, and people’s participation in these processes and institutions, and new forms of mobilisation have contributed to this. Along with the left organisations that retain their focus to defend the interests of the poor peasantry and rural workers, there have emerged a number of unions and outfits that work on the issues of the landless, tribal and forest dwellers, scheme workers, displaced populations, and rights of the tenants and women. Majority of the participating membership of *Bhartiya Kisan Union* (Ekta Ugrahan), BKU Dhakaunda, Kirti Kisan Union, and others are small and marginal farmers (Abbi, 2022; also see Singh & Ram, 2022; Tiwana in this volume). These developments have changed the class composition of the membership and

leadership of farmer and other organisations working in the rural areas, and as a result, the monopoly and control of the rich capitalist farmer class over leadership and mobilisations have been challenged and diluted.

In the Indian context, Patnaik (2014) notes that the contradiction emerged from pursuing neoliberal policies pits the interests of the workers and peasants against those of neo-imperialism. A series of protests bringing together all segments of peasantry and rural wage labourers joined by the urban trade unions and civil society organisations has provided the opportunity to enlarge the struggle in the countryside. During the anti-farm law movement, a common rallying point for the broader mobilisations comprising different sections of the peasantry and rural masses that are marked by their conflicting class interests on a day-to-day basis at the village level was to resist the attempt to alter the land use, agri-trade, and terms of stocking and procurement to serve the interests of the authoritarian national corporate capital and imperialist transnational capital. These broader mobilisations are emerging across the world, especially in the developing block where masses are taking to the roads to protect their land, labour rights, food security, and natural resources from the profit-greedy capital of the developed economies. Patnaik (2001, p. xxviii) concludes, “that the principal contradiction within the agrarian economy of India is moving decisively, once more, towards that between farmers as a whole and imperialist globalisation under the dominance of the economic agenda of finance capital” (“Introduction” in Alice Thorner (Ed.)).

The question of the class character of the anti-farm law movement has to be informed and understood in the larger rural distress and crisis of agriculture that have brewed over many decades as an outcome of the neoliberal policies as discussed earlier. The movement opposing the three farm laws was not a spontaneous one. The origin of this movement can be seen in a number of sustained struggles by various farmer organisations and organisations of the rural working classes, independently and collectively, over the last two decades or so on a range of issues concerning majority of the rural masses.⁴ Efforts in the direction of building united resistance through *Bhoomi Adhikar Aandolan* (Land Rights Movement) and *All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee* (AIKSCC) have proved fruitful in bringing together various organisations (for a detailed timeline of these mobilisations, see Fadaee, 2022). The anti-farm law movement had these sustained mobilisations that have been successful in making several governments take back or put on hold a number of anti-farmer decisions and in winning some temporary relief measures in its background.

The formation of the *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM), the joint farmers’ front, that led the anti-farm law movement was a significant development in bringing together a range of organisations and building a cross-class alliance. This joint platform comprised more than 400 organisations, big and small, representing millions of farmers, belonging to poor, middle, and rich peasant classes, *Adivasis*, landless tenants, and women farmers across the

country. This diversity in terms of social, economic, region, ethnic, and ideology among the participating forces of the movement represented a wider socio-agrarian base. This broad-based alliance also kept in check dominance of any one ideology or class in leading the movement. Therefore, while organisations had their own political, ideological, and class affiliations, they all shared one common demand – withdrawal of the three farm laws.

Due to the predominance of the contradiction between the large majority of peasantry and corporate capital, the struggle against the three farm laws overrode the internal contradictions of the rural-agrarian classes. P. Krishnaprasad, office bearer of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), a left farmer organisation, and an active organiser in the anti-farm laws movement, articulates the class character of the movement while underlining the prominent contradictions that have emerged under the neoliberal regime, “The pro-corporate farm laws making a paradigm shift in agriculture and also violating the federal character of the constitution have further intensified conflicts between the big capitalist forces on the one hand and the peasantry, including agricultural worker, poor and middle peasants, the rich peasantry and the capitalist farmers on the other hand. Even among the capitalist landlords, there is a division. The unconditional support of the working class under the leadership of the trade union movement to this class struggle to save peasant agriculture is a major factor behind this process” (Krishnaprasad, 2020).

Participation of the workers: worker–peasant alliance and left politics

The worker–peasant alliance has been at the core of left’s understanding and mobilisation to resolve the agrarian question almost since the inception of the Communist Party of India. Alavi (1965, p. 265) notes, “Lenin’s concept of an alliance of the working class and the peasantry was a major advance on earlier Marxist propositions; for it was based on a detailed analysis of the transformations that were taking place in the agrarian economy of Russia and the pattern of social forces that was emerging as a result”. The worker–peasant alliance approach can be termed as the hallmark of the left peasant politics as it plays an important role not only in tactical and strategical terms but also in formulating demands and slogans for the struggles. Dhanagare (1975, pp. 31–32) notes this strategic partnership between the two for a revolutionary struggle in the formation of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Party (WPP), “the first Left wing peasant organisation in India was not conceived as an independent and an exclusively peasant body but was bracketed with ‘workers’ – the senior partner”. Historically, a major boost to the left politics in the pre-independence phase was the founding of the AIKS in 1936, which was the first all-India level peasant organisation. The rise of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) in the early 1930s made a significant impact, ideologically and politically, on the tasks and character of the peasant mobilisations. Communists were successful by using the “United Front” strategy

by expanding the AIKS influence across the country and providing a broad base to the activities of the organisation (Dhanagare, 1975).

In the post-1990s phase, the left's attempt to mobilise masses in the light of the ever-evolving agrarian and development landscape was significant but not sufficient to form a worker–peasant alliance to challenge the neoliberal project. However, as discussed earlier, there have been concerted efforts by the left trade unions, farmer organisations, and various mass and class organisations to draw these sections under united campaigns and struggles. According to Hannan Mollah, a veteran peasant leader, the anti-farm law movement was not the first occasion where a larger peasant–worker unity and solidarity was developed, but it was certainly a major boost to such a strategic alliance that has significant implications for the future. While the farm laws posed a threat to land-owning classes by changing the production, trading, and marketing in favour of the corporates, the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020 was aimed at doing away with restrictions on pricing, hoarding, and stocking of the essential commodities. This would mean dismantling of the state procurement system, subsequently resulting in the erosion and weakening of the subsidised public foodgrain distribution system. Despite its drawbacks, the public distribution system (PDS) is critical for a large section of the rural and urban poor for their food security and nutritional well-being. These concerns in addition to loss of livelihood in agriculture resonated and were at the centre of the support and solidarity to the anti-farm movement from the non-landowning labouring classes. There were three important forms in which the participation of the rural workers was visible in the movement: at Delhi border protest sites, highway toll plazas, and through resource contribution in sustaining the movement. While specific efforts were made to reach out to the working classes in villages and towns through trade union platforms, mass organisations, and civil society forums, sustained participation and involvement from the rural workers evolved organically over time from the grassroots. A number of commentaries and research articles have discussed the issue of participation of the working class, especially the rural workers, its complexities, and limitations (for details, see Krishnan, 2022; Kumar, 2021; Lerche, 2021; Mogha, 2021; N. Singh, 2022; S. Singh, 2022a, 2022b). We do not wish to repeat the same here; however, to develop an understanding of the evolution and nature of the worker–peasant unity, we provide a detailed list of the joint action calls and mobilisations organised by these classes by using the documentation of the People's Archive of Farmers' Protests (pafp) (2022, pafp.in).⁵

In addition to the participation of the rural wage workers, major central trade unions (CTUs), workers' associations, employees' federations and unions of various sectors, and taxi and transporters' unions joined hands with the peasant classes in the anti-farm law movement since its inception and continued throughout its course with closely coordinated protest actions and mobilisations. On November 26 (2020), the day of farmers' march to Delhi (*Dilli Chalo*), ten CTUs gave a call for an all-India general strike in

support of the farmers' demands. A large number of agricultural workers and scheme workers in rural areas joined the protesting farmers and confronted the police which tried to stop the farmers from moving towards the national capital (for more details, see S. Singh, 2022). The CTUs jointly with farmer organisations observed three successful countrywide strikes on December 8 (2020) and March 26 and September 27 (2021), and on February 6 (2021), a nationwide transport strike was also observed in support of the farmers' demands. During the course of the anti-farm law movement, the trade unions and farmer organisations carried out a series of joint protest actions to translate the slogan of the worker–peasant unity into action.⁶ The solidarity and unity of the workers and peasants during this struggle was not tokenistic, but it emerged from the realisation that it is the policies of neoliberalism and pro-corporate regimes that pose a threat to both these classes, and a common struggle is needed to confront this threat. As a result of this united struggle, the farmer organisations also extended their support to the demands of the workers. Demand to scrap the four labour codes was one such demand that was raised and supported consistently by the SKM and the farmer organisations. To elaborate on the point of the emergence of the unity between the two basic classes through joint struggle, here we provide details of the joint solidarity actions conducted and common demands that were raised during the anti-farm law movement.⁷

The anti-farm law movement was an important movement where the left has been able to make advances in working towards building the worker–peasant unity. It is true that the farmer organisations during the anti-farm law movement needed all the support that would help them succeed in the withdrawal of the farm laws, and apprehensions about the continuity of this unity are valid. It is not surprising that many of the farmer organisations are not invested in working for a worker–peasant alliance in the long term; however, after the victory of the anti-farm law movement, there is a greater realisation for the need of this alliance under an authoritarian–corporate regime in India which has aggressively pursued and consolidated the neoliberal project, sharpening the contradictions between the working classes and the corporate capital.

Has the much celebrated “worker–peasant unity” during the anti-farm law movement died down, or is it being carried forward in the post-movement phase? We show, in brief, the united protest actions and mobilisations undertaken by the trade unions and farmer organisations to sustain and carry forward this alliance post-December 2021.

The national convention of the CTUs and Independent Federations on November 11, 2021, resolved to intensify united struggles and strengthen the worker–peasant unity. The convention gave a call for a two-day all-India strike, which was supported by the SKM leadership. The farmers and agricultural workers actively participated in the countrywide general strike on March 28–29, 2022, which was one of the largest general strikes in the history of the working classes in India. The left-affiliated class organisations,

Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), AIKS, and AIAWU observed the Worker–Peasant Unity Day on January 19, 2022, and raised common demands of these sections through joint protest actions across the country. A joint National Convention on the Rights of Workers and Peasants was organised by these organisations in New Delhi on September 5, 2022. The convention decided to strengthen the unity of the workers, peasants, and agricultural workers and to extend support and solidarity to each other in intensifying joint actions. On April 5, 2023, a nationwide worker–peasant joint rally was held in New Delhi by the organisations of workers, farmers, and agricultural workers. To chalk out the plans to consolidate the unity of the workers and farmers, a joint meeting of the CTUs and SKM was held in New Delhi on July 13, 2023. Following this, on August 24, 2023, the SKM and CTUs organised a joint convention at the Talkatora Indoor Stadium in the national capital, which was perhaps the first national-level worker–peasant joint convention in the history of independent India. The convention called upon the farmers and workers to organise *mahapadavs* (mass sit-in demonstrations) on a common 21-point demand charter at the governor residences in state capitals all over the country from November 26 to 28, 2023. To popularise the common demands, state-level joint conventions were organised, and joint mass campaigns were undertaken in the coming months. The major demands of this call included legal guarantee to MSP, increase in input subsidy, loan waivers for the peasantry and agricultural workers, comprehensive crop insurance scheme, expansion of MGNREGA, stringent implementation of the Forest Rights Act, strengthening the PDS, National Minimum Wage of Rs 26,000 per month, abolition of the contract and casual system, repeal of the four labour codes, reversion to the old pension scheme, filling up of all government vacant posts, and an end to privatisation and to the National Monetisation Pipeline. These mass sit-ins received massive support and participation in most state capitals where the workers and farmers cooked, ate, and stayed together for three days listening to their leaders about the policies of liberalisation and privatisation that pose common challenges to these classes and the necessity to forge unity to combat these policies. In addition to these national-level joint protest mobilisations, in several states, workers and farmers have undertaken joint campaigns and solidarity actions on state-specific demands.⁸

These successful joint actions, during and post-anti-farm law movement, mark an advancement in the direction of unity and solidarity among the large majority of the working people. The anti-farm law movement was an important development in building united resistance to the neoliberal regime in general and against the state-facilitated corporate takeover of agriculture in particular by forging issue-based broader class alliance of different strata of the peasantry, rural wage labourers, workers, professionals, and sections of the middle classes. The participation of large sections of the rural population made this movement qualitatively different from the peasant movements of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, which were characterised by the invisibility of

the rural wage workers and small and marginal peasantry. The advancement of the unity and solidarity among the farmers and workers is a significant development not only for protecting the livelihoods and agriculture but also for the larger political-policy discourse in the country.

There are dangers of sweeping generalisations and oversimplified interpretations under the “worker–peasant unity” slogan. Especially, the analysis of the unity between the sections of peasantry and rural labourers is a complex one, given the opposing class interests in the agrarian production system. Lerche (2021) argues that the opposing class interests and contradictions between the class of dominant landowning castes and landless rural workers have been reworked, and there emerged an overriding economic interest bringing these two, usually in conflict with each other, classes together in their opposition to the farm laws. It has to be noted that it is mainly the left that relies on a worker–peasant alliance to bring about a progressive social change that worked in building and translating this alliance into action. The worker–peasant alliance has worked out better on ground where the left organisations have strong presence. S. Singh (2022a) notes that the farmer organisations in Punjab took up the issues of farm wages, homestead plots, pensions, and waiving off electricity and water bills for the rural wage labourers during the anti-farm law movement while in Haryana, the movement had a single dimensional focus to protest against the farm laws. The day-to-day caste and class conflicts between these sections remain a major issue in forging long-lasting solidarities. To carry forward and strengthen the unity among the basic classes that emerged during the anti-farm law movement, sustained struggles on common demands have to be launched.

Concluding remarks

The successful movement against the three farm laws in India can be seen as an important development against international and domestic monopolist corporate capital, which, under the current system of globalisation, wants to integrate Indian peasantry into the accumulation network of global capital. These new developments in the neoliberal phase of capitalism have brought additional elements to the agenda of the contemporary agrarian question in the country. The movement is also significant in intensifying and strengthening the resistance of the peasants, indigenous people, petty producers, and workers across the developing world to the hegemonic transnational capital. As Patnaik (2014) argued, the first such new element is the defence of large sections of the peasantry, not just landless and marginal farmers, against imperialist and neoliberal policies. The ongoing efforts of the authoritarian-neoliberal regime to modernise Indian agriculture are equivalent to the transnational capital taking control of peasant production. We have shown how a threat of loss of land, autonomy over the production process, doing away with the public procurement, and threat to food security

under the corporate dictates reinforce a strategy of a broad-based alliance of the peasantry and working masses.

This movement will have a significant impact on the nature and understanding of the agrarian question and the agrarian activism required to resolve it in the times to come. It is the collectiveness and unity among the basic producing classes that were successful in defeating a majoritarian regime that has been exceptional in managing any kind of opposition with its control over propaganda machinery and having openly used victimisation of those rising in opposition. The socio-political consequences of the anti-farm law resistance, which became a mass movement, are far-reaching. The year-long struggle contributed to the political and policy awareness of the peasantry and equipped it better with corporate and neoliberal policy discourse. We argue that the left was successful in making advancement in the direction to form a worker–peasant alliance during and post-anti-farm law movement. The movement contributed in highlighting the issues of rural and agrarian distress, inside and outside the parliament, the issues that affect the large majority of rural masses who have been launching sustained struggles on these issues over the past several years. This is an important development given the decline of the agrarian and rural voices in the national polity in the recent decades. This development also indicates the sharpening of the contradictions and antagonism between the monopolist corporate capital and the rural rich, where the top strata of the peasantry stood in opposition to the pro-corporate policy. The disillusionment of the rich peasantry with the free-market and pro-corporate policies is a noticeable outcome of this struggle. An issue-based unity cutting across different strata of peasantry formed an alliance with the workers, and rural labourers broadened the support for the movement.

We show, by using the real-time documentation of the pafp, that there was strategic convergence of the anti-farm law movement with the working-class movement. A series of successful joint actions and mobilisations was conducted by the farmers and the trade unions throughout the course of the anti-farm law movement to develop the unity and solidarity between these two classes. The efforts to carry forward and strengthen the worker–peasant unity have been sustained by closely coordinated joint protest action calls by the SKM and the CTUs after the victory of the movement in December 2021. Since the alliance between workers and peasantry is critical to bring about socio-political change in the countryside, significant efforts are required from the left organisation to materialise this alliance. The left worker–peasant organisations need to develop a tactical line of a broad anti-neoliberalism block and simultaneously need to pay attention to the existing contradictions among the peasant classes, on the one hand, and between peasants and rural labourers, on the other. While we study changing economic dynamics and the dynamics of the agriculture sector for society, our understanding must also be shaped by the local conditions and changing forms of agrarian relations. In that context, class analysis, differentiation of peasantry, capitalist development in agriculture, feudal remnant, etc., must remain important aspects of the agrarian question in India. The process of developing capitalist relations

that is underway in the Green Revolution zone of India required sufficient attention by the Marxian scholarship to transform the gravity of future peasant movements to resolve the agrarian question for the rural poor.

To resolve the agrarian question, there are two important aspects that the agrarian movement in India must address simultaneously – the struggles against contemporary authoritarian–corporate (national and international)–imperialist nexus and a class-centric mobilisation of the all non-rural rich classes to resolve the agrarian question in favour of the rural poor. These two are also interlinked, and an important task is to identify ways in which the agrarian movement is organised to build alliance of the peasantry, labourers, and workers. There is also a need to be cautious towards the feudal and socially regressive forces and dominant classes, which try to use the farmers' movement to consolidate their power and advance their interests in the countryside, as seen in some instances in regions which were the epicentre of the anti-farm law movement. Since the rich and capitalist landlords are allies of the ruling class and represent them in the countryside, whether the victory of the anti-farm law struggle will lead to these sections developing a sustained anti-neoliberal platform depends on the mobilisation of the middle and poor peasantry and workers.

A worker–peasant alliance should build struggles around the demands of the poor and marginal peasantry, wage labourers, and tenants who are the worst affected by the neoliberal regime while aiming to challenge neoliberal capitalism. Mobilisation of and by these sections is the key to bringing people-centric transformation and democratisation of the Indian countryside. The coming together of the peasant organisations and trade unions during the struggle of 2020–2021 marks a significant strategic alliance in the direction of a united working-class movement in the future and plays a significant role in resolving the agrarian question for the rural poor.

Notes

- 1 In addition to the primary demand, withdrawal of the three farm laws, of the movement, it also demanded a central law to ensure minimum support price (MSP) and state procurement and the withdrawal of the Electricity Amendment Bill, which intended to privatise electricity and rise in power tariffs.
- 2 Lerche (2021) has touched upon the complexities of the class dynamics of this broader solidarity.
- 3 These movements were termed as “Neo-Populist” (see *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1994, 21 (3–4) for a detailed discussion on this phenomenon). Also see Mehta and Sinha (2022).
- 4 Some of the important struggles by the peasantry and rural masses in the recent times have been the nationwide struggle of 2015 against the Land Acquisition Amendment Ordinance led by the *Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan* (BAA), which resulted in the withdrawal of the ordinance; mobilisation of lakhs of *adivasis* and forest dwellers on December 15, 2016, in front of the parliament for forest land rights; four nationwide *Kisan Sangharsh Jathas* and *Kisan Sangharsh Rally* of tens of thousands before the parliament in Delhi in November 2016; a victorious kisan

struggle of Rajasthan in 2017–18 for loan waiver and MSP; the united farmers' strike in Maharashtra from June 1 to 11, 2017; and the popular *kisan long march* to Mumbai and victory of the farmers and *Adivasis* for loan waiver and forest land rights in 2018; the AIKSCC's *mahila kisan sansad* in Delhi in November 2017; the worker–peasant and rural workers' massive nationwide *jail bharo* on August 9, 2018, and the *mazdoor–kisan rally* in New Delhi on September 5, 2018; and the AIKSCC's one lakh strong *kisan mukti march* in Delhi on November 29–30, 2018 (for more details, see Dhawale, 2022; Krishnan, 2022; Mollah, 2016). In addition to this, the AIKSCC prepared two seminal bills: one for freedom from indebtedness and the other for guaranteed remunerative MSP after extensive countrywide consultations and being placed before the parliament in August 2018.

- 5 An All India Agricultural Workers' Union (AIAWU) leader from Rajasthan tells that when the farmers from his state marched towards Delhi in December 2020, they were stopped at the Rajasthan–Haryana border (Shahjahanpur Khera), and the protests began by putting up tents on one side of the highway under the leadership of the agricultural workers which continued till the end of the protests in one of the most difficult and hostile locations. One could see how mobilisations and protest events included the term *mazdoor* (worker) along with *kisan* (farmer) in the event titles. A number of joint protest action calls were observed successfully under the *mazdoor–kisan ekta* (worker–peasant unity) banner and slogan throughout the country. Even though contingents of workers ensured their regular presence at the border protest camps, the more visible participation from them was on specific calls given by the SKM. The SKM gave calls to celebrate events observing specific days associated with the leaders of the *Bahujan*, *Adivasis*, and working-class icons under the leadership of the workers and *Bahujans*; for example February 27 (2021), Sant Ravidas Jayanti was celebrated as Worker–Peasant Unity Day; April 11 (2021), the birth anniversary of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule was observed at the protest sites; April 14 (2021), Dr. Ambedkar's birth anniversary was celebrated as the "Save Constitution Day" and the "Kisan–Bahujan Unity" day; May 1 (2021), May Day celebrations were carried out at all protest sites; June 9 and June 30 (2021), the martyr day of the tribal leader and freedom fighter Birsa Munda and *Hul Kranti Diwas* were celebrated at protest sites, respectively; September 29 (2021), Kisan–Mazdoor Ekta Diwas was celebrated on the death anniversary of Prithvi Singh Gorakhpuriya, a prominent left leader from Haryana; November 15 (2021), the birth anniversary of Birsa Munda was celebrated; and November 24 (2021), the birth anniversary of Sir Chhotu Ram as "Kisan–Mazdoor Sangharsh Diwas" was celebrated by the workers and the farmers. On these days, the proceedings at all protest sites were conducted by the *Bahujan* speakers. *Padyatras* (marches of foot) were taken out from villages by the workers and farmers jointly, and large contingents of the rural and urban working classes reached border protest sites to express their solidarity with the struggle. In the context of Punjab, Jodhka (2021) notes how the farmers' unions made efforts to include different sections of peasantry and landless wage workers. These efforts included invoking the symbols of Sikhism and inclusive theological approach of the *Sikhi*; in addition to this, the farm unions made specific moves to reach out to Dalit and wage workers for their participation (p. 1367). Leaders and intellectuals of the Dalit movement and other marginalised sections organised a *mahapanchayat* in the national capital city on February 28 (2021) and visited the border protest sites to extend their support and solidarity to the struggle.
- 6 On February 3, 2021, protest and burning of copies of the new labour codes; March 15–18, 2021, nationwide strikes in the financial sector; May 26, 2021, black day was observed on completion of six months of the movement;

July 23, 2021, protests against privatisation and defence ordinance; August 9, 2021, “Save India day” was observed by workers and farmers to mark the beginning of the Quit India Movement; and September 5, 2021, *Kisan–Mazdoor Mahapanchayat* in Muzaffarnagar. On November 11, 2021, a national convention of the CTUs and Independent Federations was held at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, which was supported by the SKM leadership, for intensifying united struggles and strengthening worker–peasant unity through joint protest actions. The convention called for a two-day national general strike on March 28–29, 2022.

- 7 The national convention organised by the SKM on the completion of nine months of the protests at Delhi borders adopted resolutions in support of the workers fighting against the four labour codes, expansion of days and wages under MGNREGA, and implementation of the Forests Rights Act, and against unemployment and hunger; displacement of tribals; massive price rise of diesel, petrol, and cooking gas and other essential commodities; efforts to dismantle PDS; atrocities against women; privatisation of education and the health system; divisive communal agenda; and selling of national assets and infrastructure to private players. The SKM opposed the central government’s National Monetisation Policy (NMP) announced on August 23, 2021, which prepares a road-map to sell the country’s assets and infrastructure, such as national highways, public sector undertakings, and sports stadiums, to mobilise financial resources through disinvestment. The SKM extended support to the protests by employees’ federations in the finance sector that was observed on March 15 (2021) as an anti-privatisation day. This was accompanied by an All India Bank Strike, which extended to March 16. The SKM came in support of the *Bharat Bandh* call given by the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) against GST, e-commerce policies, and rising oil prices on February 26, 2021. Farmer organisations in Punjab participated in protests in support of the Contract Employees Sangharsh *Morcha* in Morinda, Punjab, in October 2021 and in the protest at Nabha against plans to remove 906 guest teachers in November 2021. Through the protests at the grassroots, demands of the rural proletariat and marginalised sections also became part of these movements. One of the issues of confrontation between the farmers and labourers is the issue of wages. During the paddy transplanting season (2021), farmers in several villages of Punjab fixed depressed wage rates for labourers by using force and dominance. The SKM and a number of farmer unions came out in support of labourers and asked farmers and panchayats to hold talks with them while deciding wages. Farmer unions and unions of rural labour in Punjab launched united agitation to raise demands related to MGNREGA and residential plots, and check on micro-finance and credit groups, loan waiver, and electricity bill waiver. One of the first protests for these demands was held from August 9–11 (2021) in Patiala, the home city of Punjab chief minister. On October 25 (2021), farmers in Punjab laid siege to the Bhatinda mini secretariat demanding crop loss compensation of Rs 60,000 per acre for cotton farmers and Rs 30,000 per labourer household.
- 8 For example in the state of Haryana, months-long strikes by Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and rural sanitation workers received active support from the farmer and other class organisations. Both these agitations were successful and got a number of their demands met by the state government.

Farmer organisations have also played an important role in countering the communal polarisation during and after the anti-farm law movement (for details, see Singh, 2023).

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Debanjan Roy

4 Deepening ties with the homeland

Multiple dimensions of the UK Sikh diaspora's role in the farmers' protest

Pritam Singh

Introduction

That the diaspora all over the world feels and acts in numerous ways in relating to the homeland is a very well-researched subject. However, the specific form in which each diaspora responds to specific events in its homeland requires a concrete and specific examination within the broad theme of the general diaspora–homeland relationship.

This format of the general and specific is the best way to approach the subject of the response of the Sikh diaspora to the farmers' protests in India. The role of the Sikh diaspora in the farmers' protest had both the element of general diaspora–homeland connection and the specific relationship of the Sikh diaspora especially with a rural background to Punjab and its farming future. The rural dimension of the Sikh diaspora's response to the farmers' protests also explained the uneven nature of Sikh diaspora enthusiasm and mobilisation in supporting the farmers' protest; that is it was of a relatively higher nature in areas with higher concentrations of Sikhs from more rural backgrounds. Additionally, and more specifically, the response of the Sikh diaspora to the farmers' protests included views and feelings about the complicated and troubled politico-economic location of the Sikhs in Punjab and India.

A single chapter cannot explore in depth the multitude of ways the UK Sikh diaspora supported the farmers' protests, but we would attempt to hint at its main forms.

We look at open expression of support through rallies and protest marches; supporting the *langar* structure for continuous availability of food at the protest sites; provision of multidimensional technical support; medical assistance; intellectual critique of the farm laws and defence of farmer unions' demands; using music as a mode of support; moral, psychological, and spiritual support through activating the Sikh gurdwaras to take interest in the farmers' movement; political support through mobilisation of the UK political parties' positions to pressurise the UK government to critique the repressive measures of the Modi government against the farmers' protest activities; and interconnecting these activities to build a general narrative in British society that was supportive of the farmers' action.

Main forms of the Sikh diaspora support to farmers' protests

Supportive rallies and protest marches

The bigger cities in the UK with substantial Sikh populations, such as London, Birmingham, Leicester, Manchester, and Wolverhampton, witnessed huge rallies in support of the farmers' movement. This was the first time after the 1984 Blue Star army action at the Golden Temple in Amritsar that Sikh men and women of all ages and their children had participated in such massive rallies, some with an estimated 100,000 participants (Tatla, 1999). Some of the participants came with their tractors and trollies to symbolise the farmer dimension behind these rallies so that the mainstream population in these cities could immediately understand the linkage between these rallies and the farmers' protests in India. Similar such rallies took place in many towns with substantial Sikh populations in the USA, Canada, and Australia. The global Sikh diaspora constitutes between 8% and 11% of the global Sikh population,¹ but the effectiveness of the diasporic Sikh activities is primarily due to its concentration in some major cities in these countries. It is important to add here that the countries and cities with even smaller Sikh populations also held rallies, for example Germany, Italy, and New Zealand. In some cities such as Oxford, which has only a few hundred Sikh families, the local Sikh community supported rallies organised by the students at the university. These students consisted of two groups: those with an Indian background and who were aware of the larger political significance of the farmers' protests in India, and non-Indian students who viewed the protests as an important struggle to strengthen democratic forces in India and globally. One such rally was held in the open in the University Park due to COVID-19 restrictions on organising meetings in closed places. I was requested to speak to the gathering to explain the political economy of the farm laws that entailed agro-business takeover of Indian farming. One interesting development at this gathering was symbolic of the larger ramifications of the diasporic action. Some local farmers joined even though they had not even been invited. One of them came with a big van of his that had a huge cloth banner with these words: "We support Indian farmers".

Supporting the langar structure for continuous availability of food at the protest sites

The *langar* is an old and well-established institution started by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, and popularised by Guru Amar Das (1479–1574), the third Sikh guru. The *langar* involves collective cooking of food and then jointly sharing of the food sitting together. Both the cooking and sharing of food are done without any distinction of caste, class, religion, gender, race, sexual orientation, or disability. Guru Nanak initiated this project to spread the message of egalitarianism, an ethic as the centre of the

Sikh tradition. Partaking of the food in the *langar* is not limited to only those who have participated in the cooking. Anyone can eat food in the *langar*. For example in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the most sacred shrine of the Sikh community, every day 100,000 people get free food and on important days, 200,000 (Singh, 2021e, pp. 85, 95). This has continued without interruption. Many poor people come and eat. They are not Sikhs, and they may not even know anything about Sikhism.

There is an accumulated experience in the Sikh community about how to run the *langar*. It requires careful logistics management that has been adapted and innovated through centuries of collective self-experience: how to get the raw food; how to store, process, cook, and distribute it; and how to clean up after cooking and consumption. The organisation of the *langar* at the farmers' protest site on the border of Delhi became critical to maintain the continuity and strength of the protest.

Many times, during industrial workers' strikes, after one or two months, when wages are not coming in, children are hungry at home, and women face tremendous difficulties in bearing the extra burden of providing food to the family, morale starts breaking down among both male and female workers. What the *langar* did was to keep the morale high at the protest sites by assuring the protesting farmers and their allies that there would be a continuous supply of food.

The message from the *langar* institution to the protesting farmers was, "you might have difficulty in the summer. There might be mosquitoes, they might bite you. In winter you might have terrible weather and have to bear all the discomfort. When the rain comes, your makeshift arrangement is likely to be demolished and you would have to start again – but you will have food".²

Therefore, the fact that there was a continuous supply of food kept the morale up; no one went hungry. The government understood that the way these people were organising the *langar* would enable them to carry on, if necessary, until the 2024 general election. This would have been too risky politically and electorally for the government. This realisation on the part of the government was a key hidden factor in forcing the government to back down eventually in repealing the three farm laws.

The *langar* also provided something else: that many poor communities including agricultural and industrial workers from the surrounding areas would eat too. That created good will with surrounding communities.

Sometimes middle-class employees working in Delhi would come to the *langar*, eat, and then go to their job. So, the *langar* became an alternative culture, overcoming caste and gender barriers as men were cooking, distributing, and supporting. Most crucially, it also became a vehicle for widening the mass support for the farmers. A widely circulated motto during the protest captured the link between the farmers, *langar*, and food: no farmer, no food.

The Sikh diaspora all over the world provided critical support to strengthen the institution of *langar* by providing generous funding to augment the funds raised internally by farmers' organisations and Sikh gurdwaras for buying materials for food and the infrastructure of the *langar*.

The Indian government was rattled by this operation and deported Darshan Singh Dhaliwal, a very rich Sikh American, solely for funding the *langar* (Arora, 2021; Kashmir News, 2021). Obviously, this act provoked criticism because the *langar* is viewed as essential to the Sikh tradition. The government action was seen as attacking the religious tradition of supporting the *langar* and through that as attacking the Sikh religion. Since the *langar* institution also has very wide support among the non-Sikh population in India, the government action proved counterproductive from the viewpoint of weakening the farmers' protest.³

One of the most notable contributions of the UK Sikh diaspora to the farmers' protest was the support of the UK-based Sikh charity Khalsa Aid, which has a long and distinguished record of providing free food in many disaster zones in the world. Khalsa Aid provided aid for *langar* and for other infrastructural support measures.

Provision of multidimensional technical support

A few people from the global Sikh diaspora, including from the UK Sikh diaspora, who were doctors, engineers, and technicians, left their jobs or took a long leave and settled at the farmers' protest site. There were people who came from Dubai. A doctor from America (Swaiman Singh) became a celebrity for his multidimensional support to the farmers' struggle (Kaur, 2021). Many times, farmers dug wells at the protest site to provide enough water to augment the water provided by the local communities around the protest site. Diasporic individuals with engineering expertise provided critical support in the water-providing arrangements. Diasporic doctors provided medical assistance to sick or injured participants. This was of particularly great significance due to the fear of spreading COVID-19. Despite large gatherings at the protest sites, there were only isolated cases of participants testing positive. The medical advice and assistance provided by the diasporic medical professionals at the protest site were critical not only to those who had tested positive but also in taking measures to control the spread of COVID-19. Some deaths also took place, and medical professionals provided the necessary assistance to transport the dead safely to their villages for the last rites. Many of these medical professionals contributed to the financial assistance arranged by the farmers' organisations and the Punjab government to the families of the dead farmers.

Some IT specialists and media specialists from the diaspora helped in organising an alternative media structure to counter the anti-farmer narrative of the mainstream media in India. They helped in setting up a YouTube TV channel, a regular newssheet called *Trolley Times* that provided not only factual updates on the farmers' movement but also well-researched articles raising awareness of the issues involved in the farmers' protest. They also set up Facebook and Instagram accounts for the farmers' organisations leading the protests to use social media effectively against the pro-government media

narratives. They also used their technical and academic skills to produce documentaries on specific issues pertaining to the protests.

Some diasporic individuals with teaching qualifications and experience set up classes for the children who had joined their family members at the protest sites. They extended those classes to the children of the poor families from the surrounding local communities. This contributed to further widening of the support for the farmers' protests even from those sections of society who were not involved in farming. In some cases, they also initiated the setting up of libraries in association with members of the local communities. This initiative invited appreciation from the Delhi literati who also contributed to the library movement.

Intellectual critique of the farm laws and defence of the farmers unions' demands

An especially important dimension of the farmers' movement and a rather new development in social movements in India was the active intellectual support the movement received from diasporic academics. A significant sociological change has taken place over the last few decades in that the sons and daughters of the Punjab peasantry have become senior academics in various parts of the world.

This layer of the academics has roots in the Punjab peasantry, but many of them now occupy important academic positions at Oxford, Cambridge, London, Copenhagen, New York, and Vancouver, just to mention a few.⁴

These academics were at the forefront in critiquing the farming laws at an intellectual level. They confronted the agribusiness corporations' economists and the pro-government economists, debating them in newspapers and on TV. They rebutted their arguments everywhere.

They exchanged views and supported each other as they were writing articles, seeking information, and listening to each other's presentations. Informally, there was a network, and the majority had grandparents who were farmers. This was an entirely different intellectual layer, an asset that the peasantry of previous generations did not have.

At the beginning of the launch of the farming laws, the pro-government policymakers and pro-agribusiness academics were confident of the benefits of the agriculture market reforms, but eventually their self-confidence started to waver because the pro-farmer academics questioned them on every issue – whether it was their assertions that this would double the income of the farmer, provide a workable method of dispute resolution, provide an adequate minimum support price (MSP) through the market mandate, and lead to an adequate minimum wage and better food security.

The pro-farmer academics played a critical role in building the amazing international solidarity that emerged in support of the Indian farmers' movement. I was asked by a French newspaper to write an article, and the same article was translated into Spanish. Farmers in different countries were

suffering from adverse economic conditions, and the movement of Indian farmers led to discussions about whether the old economic model of agriculture to industry to services is something that we should accept uncritically. In the era of global climate change, the importance of small farming was emerging as a key issue, and the defence provided by pro-farmer academics in the diaspora for small farming was a direct challenge to the pro-corporate agenda of large farming embedded in the farming laws against which the farmers were protesting.

Using music as a mode of support

Some estimates suggest that 400 songs were composed on the farmers' struggle. In composing these songs and popularising them, the very well-established musical community of the Punjabi diaspora, as well as the Punjabi musicians in India, got to work in a synergic fashion. In the UK diaspora in general and the Punjabi diaspora in particular, the popularity of the *bhangra* music has been phenomenal. This popularity has gone beyond the Punjabi community and has been incorporated into the mainstream youth music culture of the country (see Kaur & Kalra, 2015: 403–412). The *bhangra* music, whose popularity had gone beyond the UK and Punjab to other countries in the world, had its origins in the UK, where the UK-based Punjabi musicians had played a key innovative role.

In the farmers' movement, Punjab-based singers like Kanwar Grewal, who is a Sufi singer and sings in the Sikh and Muslim Sufi tradition, became extremely popular. There were no visible links between the musical genre of Punjab-based singers such as Grewal and the *bhangra* genre popularised by the UK-based Punjabi diasporic musicians, but it is perfectly conceivable that there were many invisible links and associations between the two genres.

The contribution of music to the success of the farmers' movement cannot be overstated. The music was particularly important for the younger generation to connect with the movement. Members of the younger generation who were present at the protest sites did not want to listen to speeches all the time. Music had a multidimensional role – it was entertaining, therapeutic, and inspiring. The recognition of the importance of music led to the mushrooming of many young people composing and singing songs at the protest site. Many 9- and 10-year-old boys and girls sang or recited poetry. Such young people were listened to with great interest in the UK Sikh diaspora, and this helped cement ties with the younger generations of the Sikh diaspora in the UK and other countries.

Moral, psychological, and spiritual support

The success of all great movements is ensured not only through visible and material support extended to the movement but also through the silent support that provides moral, psychological, and spiritual strength to the movement participants.

One dimension of the moral and psychological support to the farmers' movement can be judged from the identification of the young children with the movement. This happened both within Punjab (and I guess within Haryana and UP too) and among the diasporic Sikh population. I had the opportunity to gain some first-hand experience of both locations.

I have a niece who lives in a palatial house in Punjab. She told me about a conversation with her 9-year-old son, who studies in an expensive private school. He told his mother, "Mummy, I feel terribly upset sleeping at night. I keep on thinking about the farmers. How it must be so difficult".

She realised that although she had never talked to him about the farmers, he had been listening. He understood that "they" are a part of "us".

Similarly, the children in the diaspora, those who were born and brought up in the UK and who go to Punjab maybe once a year or every two years, were thoroughly involved.

In my neighbourhood in the UK, the daughter of a Sikh family is in her first year at the university. On January 26, she stayed awake the whole night because she wanted to follow what was happening. The next day she was bombarding me with questions. She also told me that she was not the only one who stayed awake the whole night, but many of her other Sikh friends felt the same way and similarly remained awake the whole night on January 26, 2021. They all had the fear that the Sikh community might be subjected to the same kind of genocidal violence that happened in November 1984. Her mother told me that the only thing that her daughter did during the movement days was to read about the struggle.

To understand the deeper psychological dimensions of these children's identification with the farmers' movement, it is important to recognise how the Punjabi farmers viewed the farm laws and their opposition to those laws. The Punjabi farmers coined the word *hond* – that is an attack on our existence – as a way of expressing their deep fears about the consequence of the farm laws. It was widely felt that the corporate takeover of agriculture that was being planned through the farming laws was not simply a design aimed at taking away their lands, but that it was an attack on their culture and traditions.⁵ That narrative chimed with the fears of the diasporic children and younger generations. They felt that if the lands of their ancestors were lost, they would lose the memory of their grandparents who toiled on that land. It was, therefore, felt as an existential crisis with immensely powerful emotional responses.

The January 26, 2021, incident expressed very powerfully the fears about the existential crisis that was seen as emerging from the operation of the farm laws. Let me briefly explain that incident and the fears associated with that.

On January 26, some Sikh groups went and put a Sikh flag on one pole in the Red Fort area. It was not put on the designated pole where the national tricolour is hoisted but on a pole much below that designated pole. It was a non-event.

The pro-government media (popularly and sarcastically called the *Godi* media, i.e. lapdog media) overplayed it, saying it was an insult to the national flag. Through this media narrative, it looked like the government was developing a strategy to whip up anti-Sikh feelings and repeat the 1984 massacre of the Sikhs, thereby derailing the whole struggle.

BJP activists, backed by the police, came to the Ghazipur site that had the fewest farmers to eject them. While the entrances to the other sites of farmers' protest such as Singhu and Tikri were guarded by thousands and thousands of people, Ghazipur had only hundreds.

Rakesh Tikait was the leader at the Ghazipur site. Although a Hindu, he had major support from the Jat Sikh farmers in UP who were on guard. These Jat Sikh guards told him that if he surrendered and was arrested, they would be massacred. Overwhelmed by hearing that the people were prepared to stand by him but would face death if he were merely arrested, he broke down and began to cry.

TV cameras caught the dramatic moment. As soon as the TV showed the scene, the Jat peasantry in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana were outraged. Within hours, thousands of farmers flocked that site, and the government's plan, if there was one, to launch this massacre was defeated.

No one can prove that the Sikh massacre was a planned strategy, but the circumstantial evidence points to what they were trying to do. In such critical moments, fears have their own logic and dynamic. The 1984 November massacre had happened in Delhi under similar circumstances where the government-controlled media had whipped up anti-Sikh hatred after the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs Gandhi, was assassinated on October 31 by two of her Sikh security guards for ordering the army action at the Golden Temple in June 1984. The similarity between the anti-Sikh media tirades at two different time periods but in the same place (Delhi) aroused fears in the global Sikh community and many non-Sikh secularists in India that a Sikh massacre was a fearful possibility. It is this possibility that frightened the younger generations of Sikhs in the diaspora and deepened their emotional ties with the farmers' movement and a longing for its success that could avert such a feared massacre.

The Sikh gurdwaras in the UK provided spiritual strength to the farmers' movement in India. Since in the Sikh tradition the spiritual and the material are intertwined, it was not a non-religious action on the part of the gurdwaras to provide support to the farmers' movement. Since the major players in the farmers' movement were the Sikh farmers, mainly from Punjab but also from adjoining states such as Haryana, UP, and Uttarakhand, the gurdwara managements felt the moral pressure for the need to pray for the success of the movement. The Sikh prayer has two parts: the major part remains the same whatever the occasion, but the minor part at the end where specific prayers are offered is optional. The specific prayer could relate to any event: birth, death, marriage, success of a specific project such as completing the

building of a house, etc. That optional specific prayer part was used at some gurdwaras to pray for the success of the farmers' movement. This prayer had its impact on men, women, and children in deepening their emotional and psychological ties to the farmers' movement.

Some gurdwara managers who were politically more advanced also took the initiative to organise scholarly discussion on the farmers' movement. I was invited to speak on the political economy of the farm laws by the management of one of the biggest and oldest gurdwaras in the UK: Siri Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara at Gravesend in Kent. When I reached the gurdwara, which I was visiting for the first time, I found that the main entrance to the gurdwara had a cloth banner prominently displaying support for the farmers' movement.

This was something extraordinary but explainable in the specific context of the farmers' movement and in the general context of the intertwining of the spiritual and material in the Sikh tradition. It was extraordinary only to the extent that it is rare for any gurdwara to publicly display at its entrance a clear political message of support to a movement.

When I enquired, although that enquiry had pleasantness associated with it, about the open display of support to the farmers' movement, I was told that this was being done at all important gurdwaras in the UK as a way of suggesting that it was a normal and acceptable part of the Sikh tradition.

The Farmers' Protest: An audience with Professor Pritam Singh
 5.00pm – 6.30pm, 5th December 2021
 At Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara (Gravesend)



Prof Pritam Singh
Oxford Brookes University

Professor Pritam Singh will speak on the Farmers' Protest; what has been and what lies ahead. The talk will be followed by an opportunity for the audience to engage with Professor Singh and ask any relevant questions.

Professor Pritam Singh is an eminent scholar who leads research on Environmental and Development Economics. His work focusses on the sustainability implications of global capitalism, specifically Indian capitalism, decentralisation and human rights with special reference to Punjab.



www.gurunanakdarbar.org
www.facebook.com/gurunanakdarbargravesend

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ ਦਰਬਾਰ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ (ਗ੍ਰੇਵੇਂਡ ਕੇਂਟ)
 SIRI GURU NANAK DARBAR GURDWARA



Figure 4.1 Poster of the Event at Siri Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara, Gravesend, Kent, UK.

I did check with a few other gurdwaras whether that claim was valid and found that it was. However, I did not check all the gurdwaras in the UK, and it is my guess that the gurdwaras such as the one in Gravesend, which has a substantial farming background Sikh community, were relatively more enthusiastic in their support to the farmers' movement in comparison with the gurdwaras in towns and areas with a Sikh community from a more urban background. The support to the movement was a common feature of all the gurdwaras associated with the diasporic Sikh community, but the degree of support was uneven given the background of the community living near a particular gurdwara.

Along with this suggested unevenness among the diasporic Sikh community in the UK regarding the degree of support to the farming movement, one additional aspect that needs to be kept in mind that unites these gurdwaras is that the troubled relationship of the Sikh community with the Indian state since the 1980s did make them support, to whatever degree, the farmers' movement because after several decades, a positive view about the Sikhs was emerging at a mass level in India. The public perception of Sikhs has undergone a dramatic change due to the farmers' movement. For a long period of time, especially after Operation Blue Star, the projected image of the Sikhs was that they were terrorists, militants, violent, and anti-Hindu.

Sikh organisations and secular groups in India had difficulty countering that view because the Indian state's media network is so powerful. That was true under the Congress government as well (Singh, 2018).

The Congress government also indulged in this exercise, and the Indian foreign embassies during the Congress rule duly participated in this shameful exercise. The farmers' movement for the first time, after a long gap, represented what I will say is the true colour of Sikhism or at least a better view of the Sikhs and their faith. People all over India became aware of the Sikh traditions of solidarity, of giving *langar* to everyone, of being supportive, and also of being peaceful. The fact that the farmers' organisations in which the Sikhs were overwhelmingly present continuously emphasised the need for a peaceful struggle led to a feeling of goodwill among the general Hindu population. The widespread feeling in the diasporic Sikh community that a correction of the Sikh image was taking place in India made them even more supportive of the farmers' movement even if, in some places, the urban background of the Sikh diasporic community did not lead them to view that this movement was protecting their material-economic interests.

Mobilisation of the support of the political parties and the UK government

The diasporic Punjabis have become active in the political life of Western countries. One Labour Party member of the UK Parliament is Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, whose grandparents were farmers. Educated at Oxford and Cambridge, he made brilliant speeches in the House of Commons about the

farmers. He mobilised several MPs and forced the government to have a discussion on the issue in the House of Commons.

For the first time a so-called Indian issue was discussed, and this despite the Tory government being pro-BJP (Wintour, 2021).

Dhesi, understanding the political and economic culture in the UK, adopted a nuanced position in criticising the Indian government. He condemned the Indian government for using repressive measures against the farmers. He understood that given the sympathetic view of market-oriented reforms in the dominant politico-economic culture in the UK, condemning the Indian government's farm laws that were aimed at facilitating greater market penetration into farming would not get much political support. He knew that many Tory government spokespeople and influential pro-business newspapers/magazines, including the *Financial Times* and *The Economist*, were not critical of the market reforms, but they were critical of the methods adopted by the Modi government to repress a peaceful and democratic movement. He, therefore, chose to focus on criticising the repressive practices of the Modi government and helped in building a narrative that was critical of the Modi government (Dhesi, 2021).

What the diasporic academic supporters of the movement did in demolishing the intellectual pretensions of the pro-corporate business and the Indian government officials in favour of farm laws, the diasporic political leaders such as Dhesi and others did in puncturing the governance methods of the Modi government in dealing with the farm protests.

The diasporic Sikhs thus played a key catalyst role in contributing to the main narrative that became hegemonic in the West that although the marketing reforms in Indian agriculture through those laws might not be problematic, the authoritarian manner in which the Modi government was dealing with the protests was highly undemocratic. This narrative played a significant role in forcing the Modi government to finally repeal the controversial farm laws that had sparked the protests.

Conclusion

The UK Sikh diaspora's role in supporting the farmers' protests in India was a combined effect of the general relationship of the diaspora to its homeland and the specific relationship of the rural background Sikh diaspora to the farming community back home. The Sikh diaspora provided moral, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, economic, technical, and political support to the farmers' movement and played a critical catalyst role in fashioning a narrative of the protests in the UK that a peaceful and democratic movement of the farmers was being subjected to repressive measures by the Modi government. The farmers' movement facilitated the deepening of the ties of the Sikh diaspora with their homeland state Punjab in a multidimensional way. A very critical aspect of these deepening ties was the utilisation by the

Sikh diasporic community in the UK and other Western countries of their diasporic experience in capturing the importance of narrative, in addition to the material aspects of the movement, in strengthening the bargaining power in all politico-economic contestations. The recognition of this importance of the narrative led community members to construct and popularise the narrative of the movement as peaceful and as opposed to the repressive practices of the Modi government against such a movement. This narrative becoming hegemonic not only in the UK but also in the entire Western world was a key factor in finally forcing the Modi government to repeal the farm laws that had provoked the unprecedented protests.

Notes

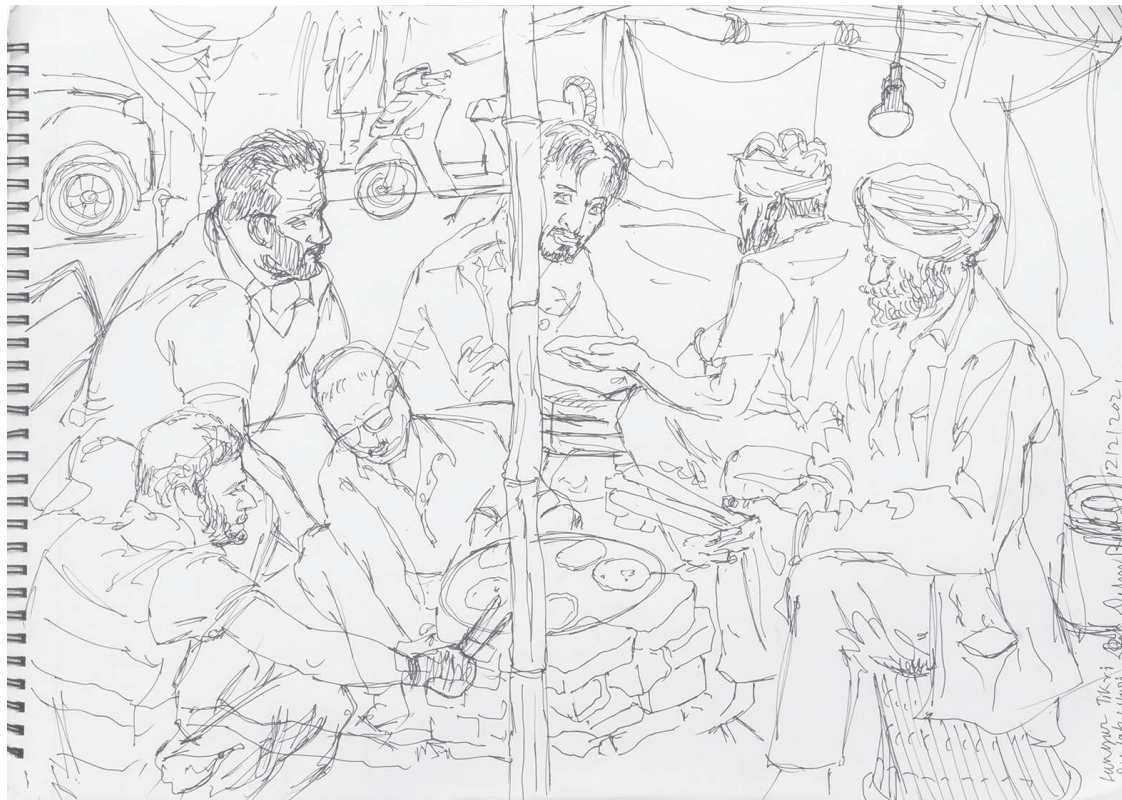
- 1 It is difficult to be exact about this proportion because the global demographic data on Sikhs is difficult to estimate as the category “Sikh” is rarely a category captured in national censuses in many countries (personal correspondence with two Sikh diaspora studies scholars – Van Dusenbery and Shinder Thandi – on November 16, 2022).
- 2 Some of the points made here were covered, although briefly, in my interview with Sara Abraham (2021).
- 3 The BJP government has belatedly admitted the mistake in deporting Dhaliwal. He was recently awarded the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award, the highest award conferred on non-resident Indians, persons of Indian origin, or an organisation or institution established and run by them. Dhaliwal has been cited as saying that Prime Minister Modi told him, “*Hum se galti ho gayi thi jo humne aap ko wapis bheja, aap ka baddapan hai ki hamare kehne par aap phir aye* [We committed a mistake by deporting you but you were gracious to accept our invitation].” Dhaliwal further added, “PM Modi met me in front of 150 people at his residence” (Arora, 2023).
- 4 As one small indicator of international solidarity facilitated by intellectual interventions by pro-farmer diasporic intellectuals, I note that I have spoken at webinars and given interviews for print media, radio, and TV (not counting UK and India because they are too many) in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Slovenia. My articles on the subject have been published in French (Singh, 2020, 2021a) and Spanish (Singh, 2021b). For print contributions specifically in the UK, see Singh (2021c, 2021d). See also Singh and Bhogal (2021a, 2021b), Gill (2020, 2021), Kaur (2020), and Thandi (2023).
- 5 For a fuller elaboration of the concept of *bond* and how it came to be deployed in the farmers’ movement, see the Wire’s podcast of the discussion/interview with me by Sidharth Bhatia (2021).

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Debanjan Roy

5 Farmers' Morcha 2020–2021

Background, achievements, and challenges

Balwinder Singh Tiwana

Introduction

To comprehend the farmers' *morcha* 2020–2021, we should take into account the changes that had happened during the last four to five decades in agriculture, particularly in Punjab from where the *morcha* was initiated. The three broad aspects of agrarian question have been accumulation, production, and politics, each having implications for agrarian transition (Tiwana & Singh, 2017). With the Green Revolution, the penetration of capital into Punjab agriculture was fastened, which led to many structural and social changes. The course of development of Punjab agriculture was diverted from the natural path to a forced/lured/interventionist path of development based on capitalist dynamism. The neoliberal policies of 1991 caused/are causing many changes in the context of transition of Punjab agriculture.

The main objectives of this study are (1) to look into the farmers' *morcha* 2020–2021 in the historical context of past peasant/farmers' struggles during the 20th century and to analyse the changes in Punjab agriculture and the village society after Indian independence; (2) to evaluate the achievements of this *morcha*; and (3) to pinpoint the challenges before the peasant/farmers' organisations in future. This study has three parts: the first part looks at the problems and peasant struggles before Indian independence for a brief historical background of the agrarian issues. This part also mentions the main peasant/farmers' struggles after independence along with the social and economic changes in the village society. The second part covers the main achievements of this farmers' *morcha* in the light of the changes in the village society of Punjab mainly during the Green Revolution and after that. The changes in the village economic and social life are a continuous process, and the socio-economic dynamism is still working. The last part of this study is related to the challenges before the organisations and leaders after the end of this *morcha* at Delhi. These challenges are economic and social involving classes, castes, and other segments of people of Punjab.

This study is based on secondary data, observations, conversations with leaders of farmers' organisations, interaction with village people during organising and mobilising the people for the *kisan morcha* and even before this

morcha, and the information gathered during participation in this *morcha* and experiences during earlier surveys conducted for other studies.

Part I

Problems and farmers' struggles before independence

From Punjab, there was a large participation of peasants in the freedom struggle. There was a significant legacy of peasant struggles in Punjab. During the first half of the 20th century, there were many movements that had involved peasants, tenants, and other sections of people. These movements/struggles were “*Pagrhi Sambhal Lehar*”, *Ghadar Lehar* (1913–1948), Gurudwara Reforms Movement (1920–1925), *Babbar Akali Lehar* (1921–1925), “*Parja Mandal*”, and *Muzara Lehar* (for these, see Ali, 1989; Chandra, 1989; Brar, 1989; Puri, 1983; Bilga, 1989; Babbar, 2006; Sidhu, 2020; Josh, 2010; Singh, 1997, 2000; Vaid, 1988).

The question of land reforms was raised and debated on many platforms and at many times. It is a settled issue that *Pagrhi Sambhal Lehar* and *kisan morcha* 2020–2021 are focused on fighting for the restoration and protection of the land of peasants (Ram, 2022). For land ownership, militant slogans were given like the slogan in April 1947 by Muzara Lehar leaders that “*Wat Adalat, Judge Sota*” (meaning land demarcation is court and stick is judge) (Vaid, 1988). So it shows the gravity of the issue of land ownership even before Indian independence.

Farmers' struggles and changes in Punjab agriculture after independence

The strong and continuous militant struggles by tenants ultimately resulted in passing the laws in favour of tenants during 1953–1955, and tenants got the ownership rights of land. Many stalwart left leaders were leading this movement. Immediately after independence, the issue of land reforms was raised by various organisations and political parties. The rights were given to the tenants through tenancy reforms, but there was difference in laws and implementation of laws across the states in relation to the rights to tenants. There were many struggles launched by different organisations on different issues such as the anti-betterment levy struggle during Partap Singh Kairon's government (Surjeet, 1986), the Mehatpur Beyt Muzara Movement (Sidhu, 2021), Chandigarh *Kisan Morcha* in 1984, struggles for diesel during 1980s, loan waiver agitations, and struggles for compensation for damaged crops at many points of times. These struggles were carried out before and after reorganisation of Punjab in the 1960s. There was reorganization of Punjab in 1960s and, many contentious issues still exist. While there is no denying the fact that these issues should be resolved, instead of resolving these, the same issues are being used by some political parties of both the states to divide people. In 2020–2021, it was proved that the social bond among people of

Punjab and Haryana is quite visible in the form of big brother Punjab and younger brother Haryana.

During the 1960s, there was shortage of food in India, and we had to import foodgrains from the USA under PL480. There was no shortage of foodgrains in Punjab during those days, and Punjab was progressing naturally without any strong external intervention. The internal dynamism of economy and agriculture was working for the development of Punjab. Technologically, the tools and implements were simple; for example iron ploughs pulled by bullocks/camels, Persian wheels, carts, traditional varieties of seeds, manure, and small cane crushers (even of wood) were used in agricultural production by the cultivators. The owner cultivators co-operated with each other during the sowing and harvesting seasons. The hired labour was hired on share basis during production, and they were called *Seeri* (the labourer who has share in production). The lands of other owners were cultivated by the peasants on share cropping basis (called *Batai*). There was need of manpower and animal power to cultivate land and for agricultural production. Generally Persian wheels/wells were the common property of many families as these were costly and the families were using these on turn basis (for this, you can also study the literary works along with works in the economics field). During this period, the production relations in agriculture were open (not hidden) and generally based on transactions in kind. The agricultural labourers and village artisans (carpenters, iron smiths, and others) were getting a share in production (Madopuri, 2002).

Gradually the use of money in agricultural production relations was increasing with the passage of time during the 1960s and 1970s but at a very slow pace. There was exploitation of tenants/cultivators by big landlords as the landlords or their family members were not doing any agricultural work in the production process. They generally received half the share of total production merely on the basis of ownership of land, and all the cost of production has to be borne by the cultivators/tenants. Secondly, there were owners of land who were big farmers, but they and their family members were working along with hired labour. But the share of hired labour in the production process was relatively much more than the labour share of their own/family labour. So there was also exploitation of labour by these land owners, and it was relatively higher than that by marginal, small, and medium farmers/cultivators. Thirdly, there were farmers/cultivators who did not own much land, and they and their family members worked along with hired labour. The share of hired labour in the production process was less than their own family labour. So they were not exploiting the hired labour at the level the big land owners and feudal landlords were exploiting. In case of marginal, small, and medium farmers/cultivators, the economic and social relations with hired labourers and their families were more cordial than those of the big land owners. There were contradictions among different classes in the villages. There was contradiction between feudal landlords and big land owners on one side and tenants/cultivators on the other side;

there was contradiction between small peasants and feudal landlords; and there was contradiction between agricultural landless labourers and land owners including small land owners. The structure of the villages was feudal. Anyway there was a low level of commodification of agricultural production. Generally the production by marginal, small, and medium farmers/peasants was for home consumption, and very less was marketed for other needs to be fulfilled by purchasing from the market. Surplus production for the market was with feudal landlords and big land owners who were selling this surplus for purchasing luxurious commodities, other things for home use, and capital accumulation. But as the major part of land was owned by big land owners and feudal landlords, they were selling the major part of agricultural production in the market. The big land owners and feudal landlords were not investing much on the improvement and development of land. Under these circumstances, the per acre production was low.

Under these conditions, there were two options before the Indian state to increase agricultural production. The first was to carry out radical land reforms against feudal landlords and to provide land to actual cultivators. With this there may be small farms of surplus land at that time, but research/literature had established that small farms were more productive than big farms. In this case, the class question was involved and the state had to act against feudal landlords. Even the Indian National Congress (INC) had passed resolutions in its conferences held before Indian independence that the land should be given to the tiller of the land. But after independence the INC backed out on this issue, and the radical land reforms were not carried out and implemented. The second option through which the Indian state can skip the class question was the implementation of new technology for production in the agriculture sector. The Indian bourgeoisie was in agreement with the feudal lords, so to avoid the class conflict, it adopted new technology for production.

The agrarian question requires an understanding of the nature, extant, and degree of changes in the production structure following the introduction of new methods of cultivation. The changes in production structure in Punjab can be understood through the examination of two important political-economic changes at the national level.

Firstly, the Green Revolution strategy was promoted by international organisations of developed countries, in particular Ford Foundations and Rockefeller, as a policy that would create food abundance in agriculturally dominant countries/societies to tackle food shortage along with agrarian conflict. This was based on an intensive use of natural resources along with an intensive use of market-purchased essential inputs such as machinery, insecticides, pesticides, seeds, and fertilizers. This new technology not only changed the production structure but also gave birth to new links between the state and cultivators, the international imperialist strategy and local communities, and within the agrarian production relations (Shiva, 1989). Punjab played an important role in introducing structural and institutional changes as per

the requirements of the new strategy. The interventionist role of the state in agriculture was not to solve the agrarian question; rather, it was to maintain the dominance of feudal class relations along with the modernisation of the production structure. The state intervention can be highlighted from partial implementation of land reforms, increased extension of irrigation facilities, expansion of institutional and non-institutional credit network, building up of the transportation network, marketing and storage facilities, investment in agricultural research and development, subsidised inputs, etc. This is one of the fundamental reasons that the process of concentration and centralisation of capital was not that rapid as it was observed by the Marxian scholars in the case of Western countries. This controlled accumulation strategy and state incentives had weakened the class conflict and contradictions for two decades after the implementation of a new strategy of cultivation (Tiwana & Singh, 2017). These two requirements (modernisation of agriculture and requirement of finance) meant that the peasants must reorganise their produce to maintain surplus to pay for market-driven inputs and the interest due on initial loans. These changes in the mode of production have resulted in a shift in production priorities from domestic consumption requirements to market-oriented agriculture (Tiwana & Singh, 2017). The changes in the methods of production by using more and more capital and consequently the commercialisation of Punjab agriculture with changes in exchange relations and labour input had clearly emerged during 1970s and 1980s (Patnaik, 1990).

Secondly, the most important changes that were a result of neoliberal reforms were changes in the character of the state from an interventionist to a facilitator. Firstly, the state, which had played a central role in the implementation of the new agricultural strategy, withdrew from the agricultural sector deliberately to create the pro-corporate conditions. Secondly, the technology introduced during the 1960s had become outdated; hence, the growth of production and productivity of crops slowed down across the state. Thirdly, the removal of quantitative and qualitative restrictions under the Agreement on Agriculture (AOA) under the auspices of the WTO reduced the bargaining power of the farmers and agricultural labour unions for price of agricultural commodities. Fourthly, the continuous decline in public investment in agriculture under the pressure of international institutions negatively affected the rural political and socio-economic structure in Punjab. Rather this policy regime of neoliberalism was pursued by the Indian state for dispossession (Tiwana & Singh, 2017; Dhawale, 2021; Nielsen & Nilsen, 2022).

The use of more capital-intensive inputs in Punjab almost exhausted the extension in the area under the plough (net sown area), taking more crops from the same area in a year (cropping intensity) and irrigated area by 1990s (see Tables 5.3 and 5.4 of Appendix). With this change in technology, there was an increase in per unit production of many crops, but it was becoming flat during the first two decades of the 21st century. Besides, these capital-intensive inputs were becoming more and more costly. Due to this situation, marginal, small, and medium farmers were trapped in financial and

social problems. All this was happening even when there was mono cropping in Punjab and all the farmers were getting MSP on wheat and paddy.

The problems were more serious for those marginal and small farmers who were cultivating land on lease. It is also clear from the above discussion that up to the 1990s, the sources of increase in income of farmers/cultivators, except prices, were exhausted, and that is why MSP has become a serious issue for cultivation. As a consequence of increasing costs of cultivation and relatively very less increase in income, the farmers/cultivators came under a huge burden of debt, which many times was not possible to be returned by marginal, small, and medium farmers. Under this socio-economic distress, they are being pushed to commit suicides. Obviously, these farmer and agricultural labourer suicides were the outcome of government policies in general and the adoption of the liberalisation, privatisation, globalisation (LPG) model in particular.

Changes in the class composition of rural Punjab

With the change in the means of production during the 1960s–1990s, the ground was created for the change in the nature of classes and the change in the class composition of villages. With both the processes of change in the means of production and relations of production work, the outcome is the change in the nature of existing classes and the emergence of new sections of people. With the mechanisation of agricultural production, the need of human labour and animal energy declined (Sidhu, 2005). The use of wooden implements in production processes declined significantly, and almost every implement and machine was made of iron, steel, plastic, and rubber. As wood was produced by farmers on their land, now almost no raw material was from the land of the farmers. In this way, the role of carpenters in agricultural production was no more in the agriculture of Punjab. So during this transformation period, many sections of the rural society almost disappeared, and the nature and work of some other sections changed during this process. The nature of work and economic activities of some sections of the rural society like barbers, watermen, and washermen changed altogether. Now their economic activities are based on monetary exchange and are fully commercial. There is a higher level of commodification of their works.

The development of productive forces and consequently the changes in production structure are clear from the present production processes in Punjab. But along with these changes, you have to analyse changing relations to put the things in the right perspective, and it is most important for the understanding of change in class composition and agrarian question in rural Punjab. The changing character of different classes after the new agricultural strategy (Green Revolution) of market-oriented production, the changing nature of family and wage labour because of the use of more and more capital in the production structure, and the methods of getting surplus through the

changed production system are core to the issues relating to change in the relations of production in Punjab agriculture. Before Indian independence and even prior to the Green Revolution, the historically emerged big landowners were dominating economically and politically in Punjab villages. They were exploiting the tenants and small cultivators. But the Green Revolution led the integration of village economy, particularly agriculture, with the market, and due to this, a new class of capitalist farmers also emerged. The economic, social, and political interests of this new class were the same as the interests of the historically big landowning class.

So presently, the historically emerged big landowners and the newly emerged capitalist farmers are dominating the village society of Punjab economically, politically, and socially. The economic basis of the power of these two classes was their control over the land. The accumulation process in village economy after the introduction of new agricultural technology was largely caused by the modern methods of cultivation on the capitalist lines. And further the surplus generated in agriculture was/is used by newly emerged capitalist farmers for other economic activities such as to give loans to small and marginal farmers and to agricultural labourers, to purchase plots and commercial buildings in towns and cities, and to invest in businesses and industry. So they are earning money from these economic activities, and some of them are even leaders of some kisan organisations. At present, these two classes are the part of rural hierarchy and are playing a leading role in the emerged socio-economic system. Besides, these two classes are constituting an insignificant proportion of total population in the rural economy of Punjab, but these are dominating the ownership of means of production in the village economy.

On the other hand, cultivation on leased land by cultivators has become risky and costly. For example, in the case of share cropping cultivation during early times, if there was crop failure, then it was a loss to both the cultivator and the owner of the land, but now the owner of the leased-out land takes money from the cultivator, and if there is crop failure due to any reason, that loss is borne by the cultivator in totality. Due to this, a large number of farmers were pushed into the debt trap and had committed suicide.

It is clear from Tables 5.1 and 5.2 that during 1971–2016, there were many significant changes in the land cultivation structure. After 1971, the share of marginal and small farms in total farms has experienced a continuous decline. Their share declined from 56.54% to 33.03%, but simultaneously the area under marginal and small holdings also declined to 9.69% of the total operational area in 2015–2016. The large and extra-large farms (above 4 ha) together constituted only 23.01% of the total operational holdings in 1971, but 64.96% of the total operational area were cultivated in Punjab. Whereas their share in the number of operational holdings increased from 23.02% in 1971 to 33.21% in 2016, the share in operational area remained almost the same.

Table 5.1 Distribution of Operational Holdings by Size Groups in Punjab (in Percentage)

<i>Year/category</i>	<i>1971</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2016</i>
Marginal and small farms (below 2 ha)	56.54	38.62	44.72	26.66	34.19	33.03
Medium farms (2–4 ha)	20.44	27.98	25.86	32.91	30.83	33.69
Large farms (4–10 ha)	18.01	25.61	23.41	30.18	28.36	27.90
Extra-large farms (above 10 ha)	5.01	7.25	6.01	7.25	6.62	5.31

Source: Government of Punjab, *Statistical Abstract of Punjab*, various issues, Chandigarh: Economic Advisor to Government of Punjab.

Table 5.2 Operational Area under Different Size Groups (Area in 000 ha)

<i>Year/category</i>	<i>1970– 1971</i>	<i>1980– 1981</i>	<i>1990– 1991</i>	<i>2000– 2001</i>	<i>2010– 2011</i>	<i>2015– 2016</i>
Marginal and small farms (below 2 ha)	600 (15.03)	399 (9.52)	492 (12.20)	320 (7.94)	370 (9.33)	383 (9.69)
Medium farms (2–4 ha)	795 (20.01)	791 (18.87)	841 (20.86)	876 (21.85)	855 (21.56)	984 (24.89)
Large farms (4–10 ha)	1514 (38.10)	1565 (37.36)	1622 (40.23)	1730 (43.17)	1713 (43.18)	1730 (43.75)
Extra-large (above 10 ha)	1068 (26.86)	1435 (34.24)	1077 (26.71)	1096 (27.03)	1029 (25.93)	857 (21.67)
Total	3977 (100)	4190 (100)	4032 (100)	4022 (100)	3967 (100)	3954 (100)

Source: Government of India, various years, *Agricultural Census*, New Delhi.

But if we divide the period into two parts, one from 1971 to 1991 and the other one from 1991 to 2016, then the share of marginal and small farms declined sharply up to 2001, and it was significantly less in 2016, but even then it was 33.03% farmers who were cultivating only 9.69% of the total operational area. There may be many causes for this change, but the fact is that they are facing huge economic and social problems. Another noticeable change is that the share of large and extra-large farms increased significantly during 1991–2011 in number and in operational area. It means the impact of new economic policies on these farms was not much as compared to that on marginal and small farms. As far as medium farms are concerned, their share in total number increased very much, but there was not that much increase in share in operational area. Clearly the situation has become relatively worse during the last five decades for marginal and small cultivators as compared to that in 1971.

The large and extra-large farms are owned and operated by the big landlords and capitalist farmers who are using modern methods of cultivation, and the majority of the operations are done by the agricultural labour (both permanent and casual). Up to the 1990s, the major process of accumulation by these two classes was actualised through agricultural production processes. Capital may be used in the production, but if the farmer is not able to generate surplus and accumulate capital, then that does not become part of the capitalistic exploitation process (Patnaik, 1999). However, the introduction of neoliberal reforms and deterioration of terms of trade for agriculture have changed the methods of surplus extraction in rural Punjab. In addition to being a source of surplus extraction, agriculture also controlled the other means from which surplus was extracted. Many landlords and big capitalist farmers are also involved in lucrative business activities such as money lending, grain mills, lodging houses, sale and lease of agricultural machinery, rice mills, big dairy farming activities, transport, educational institutions, buildings on rent, petrol pumps, marriage palaces, and receiving income from financial assets. These two classes of rural economy have good connections with the political parties, administration, bureaucracy, and local voters. These classes are exploiting the other classes in rural areas by using many methods such as exploitation of labour power of the wage workers, extraction of surplus through high rent from tenants, high rate of interest through money-lending activities to the weaker sections in rural areas, and forced purchase of land resources from small cultivators. Even state-sponsored schemes and subsidies are mostly utilised by these two classes (Tiwana & Singh, 2017).

Agricultural labourers constitute another significant class of the rural society. These workers are surviving only by selling their labour power. Whereas the share of agricultural labourers in total workers increased in Punjab from 20.11% in 1971 to 23.82% in 1991, a decline in their percentage to 16.05% was recorded in 2011. This was due to the mechanisation of the agriculture production structure which had reduced the capacity of the agricultural sector to absorb labour. Presently there is negative elasticity of labour employment in Punjab agriculture (Sidhu, 2005). This is one aspect, and the other aspect is related to migratory labour in Punjab agriculture.

During the initial period of Green Revolution, there was a significant increase in demand for agricultural labour, and this demand became the source of migration of agricultural labourers from other States. Only one fact can highlight this change, and that is the number of migrant agricultural labourers in Punjab at peak times was 1.35 lakhs in 1974–1975, and their number had increased to 8.42 lakhs during 2006–2007. Consequently, the proportion of migrant labourers in total male agricultural labourers, which was less than 20% in 1974–1975, increased to three-fourths in the peak season during the first decade of the 21st century. After this, migrant labourers in Punjab agriculture were a dominating part during peak paddy sowing seasons and were also a significant labour force in Punjab agriculture otherwise.

Besides this, migration of labour was the result of requirement of labour in agriculture at that time, but three consequences of this migration are clear: firstly, this did not allow an increase in wage rates in rural Punjab, which could otherwise might be there; secondly, the bargaining power of native labourers was weakened, which also resulted in less stronger unions of agricultural labourers; and thirdly, due this migration, the conflict of interests between migrants and native labourers was visible, which would not have been visible otherwise. Even today if you analyse the composition and formation of agricultural labourers' unions, then you will find there is no place for these migratory agricultural labourers. This is a new section of people in rural Punjab since the 1970s which is contributing to the economic activities and production in Punjab but considered neither as part of the farmers' section nor as part of agricultural labourers by the organisations. This can be considered as a distinct class of migratory agricultural labourers, which is the result of Green Revolution in Punjab.

It is very clear from the above discussion that during the first two decades of the 21st century, the socio-economic problems of marginal and small cultivators and agricultural labourers became very serious, and according to the survey conducted by Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana, and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 16,606 farmers and agricultural labourers committed suicide due to debt burden during 2000–2015. For marginal and small farmers, land is an important asset as well as an issue. In the recent past, many kisan unions such as BKU (Ekta Ugrahan) have emerged from the struggle against auction of land of marginal and small farmers by money lenders/commission agents after getting orders from courts. One more fact to be noted that came to light in the above survey is that in the total suicides, the share of agricultural labourers is about 37%. But the Punjab government has given financial help only to farmers, not to agricultural labourers (Rajalakshmi, 2021).

These are the background developments and changes in Punjab agriculture and village society over the last five decades. The question of land is still central in the village economy. We should understand the emergence of this kisan movement in Punjab in this context.

Now under these conditions, there are two types of kisan organisations in Punjab: unions that were working even in pre-independent India, and unions that came into existence during the 1970s and 1980s (during the Green Revolution period) with the change in the village economy of Punjab. And a large number of kisan unions were formed during the last four decades. A total of 32 kisan organisations took part and actively participated in *kisan morcha* 2020–2021. Many kisan organisations were left oriented/leaning, such as All India Kisan Sabha (associated with CPI(M)), All India Kisan Sabha (associated with CPI), BKU (Ekta Ugrahan), BKU (Dakaunda), Krantikari Kisan Union, Kirti Kisan Union, and Kisan Mazdoor Sangrash Committee. Earlier during the 1970s, BKU was the only union mainly watching the interest of large and extra-large farmers, and it is true that small and marginal

farmers also get some benefits due to their agitations. But the small and marginal farmers were not their focus, and their basic demands were not on their agenda. During the 1970s and 1980s, BKU never talked about land reforms, exploitation by money lenders/commission agents, high rent of leased land, and marketing problems being faced by them. Balbir Singh Rajewal became the secretary of the BKU in 1978. During the 1980s, the BKU in Punjab was led by Bhupinder Singh Mann, who was opposed by the SKM as a member of a three-member committee constituted to review these laws, and later on he refused to act as a member under pressure. In this regard, the BKU and its leaders joined hands with Sharad Joshi who supported the neoliberal policies. Some earlier leaders of the BKU who either supported neoliberal policies or got posts from the governments were not allowed to speak at the Tikri border during this *morcha*. With the passage of time after the early 1980s, due to self-interest and interest of different sections of farmers, BKU was divided into many factions. Even now there are many factions formed out of the earlier BKU like BKU (Rajewal), BKU (Mann), BKU (Krantikari), BKU (Sidhupur), BKU (Lakhawal), and BKU (Kadiyan). Many factions of the BKU are led by large and extra-large farmers, and these leaders are involved in economic activities in addition to doing agriculture. Some of them are running private educational institutions to earn money. The president of BKU (Lakhawal) Ajmer Singh Lakhawal had remained the chairman of the Punjab Mandi Board during the Shiromani Akali Dal government from 2007 to 2017. And many leaders of these factions of BKU are commission agents and exploiting small and marginal farmers. These factions of earlier BKU never raised the issues of land reforms, high rent on leased-in land, particular facilities to small and marginal farmers, loan waiver of small and marginal farmers, high rate of interest charged by commission agents and moneylenders, and corruption in schemes at the village level. But some are very active in pro-farmer politics with an emphasis on issues of small and marginal farmers' politics. Basically, these are BKU (Ekta Ugrahan), BKU (Dakunda), BKU (Sidhupur), and some others. It is obvious that the unions associated with left politics are raising the issues of farmers in general, with an emphasis on small and marginal farmers. There may be difference of opinion on the ways and methods of these organisations. From this aspect, the participation of large and extra-large farmers can be evaluated, about which I will discuss in the following pages.

Another important notable aspect is that many organisations of agricultural labourers actively participated in this struggle (Rajalakshmi, 2021). But migratory agricultural labour was missing from this *morcha*; besides, their social and economic concerns are also part of the process of changes in Punjab agriculture. As far as mobilisation of rural people is concerned, the mobilisation was primarily by the farmers' organisations. The organisations of agricultural workers had mobilised the agricultural workers in light of supporting the *kisan morcha*. The same is the case with other employees' and workers' unions. But all these supported the *kisan morcha* all the time till the end of the *morcha* at Delhi.

Part II

Achievements of kisan morcha

A brief narration of the emergence of *kisan morcha* is as follows. Immediately after the passing of the three agriculture-related Ordinances on June 5, 2020 (namely Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act), the leaders of farmers' organisations and pro-people intellectuals initiated some dialogue/conversation regarding the devastating effects of these Ordinances on farmers and people of Punjab. Initially, the people of villages were listening to the leaders and intellectuals, but they were not aware of the consequences of these laws (I also had many interactions with the farmers in the villages, particularly in Patiala district). Even some of the farmers' organisations and their leaders were not able to comprehend the gravity of the results after the implementation of these laws. I had conversation with some of these leaders. But as more and more layers of consequences were unfolded with the passage of time by leaders and intellectuals, more organisations and farmers became part of this struggle. So it had taken almost 3–4 months. By participating in the protests, people learned more, and they became the source of spreading the information among the villagers at large.

On July 27, 2020, there was an impressive Tractor March on the call of farmers' organisations, and a memorandum was submitted to the concerned members of parliament of the area. In this way, tractor has emerged as a symbol of protest by farmers against the three black agricultural Ordinances. Slowly with the advancement of agitation, the participation of youth and women has increased. After this, there was a meeting of the AIKSCC in August 2020. On August 19, 2020, in Punjab, 31 organisations of farmers decided to work together and unitedly. Agricultural workers' unions were also supporting this agitation. Then the organisations gave a call for "*Jail Bharo*" on September 7–10, 2020, and Punjab bandh on September 25, 2020, and started rail roko from October 1, 2020. But the Modi government presented the three farmer-related Ordinances as Bills in the Indian Parliament on September 14, 2020. On September 27, the president of India signed these Bills passed by the parliament (without voting in the Rajya Sabha). On September 27, SAD came out of NDA after 27 years of alliance with the BJP. And after this, the farmers started the boycott of Reliance petrol pumps, malls, and picketing at toll plazas. After that the AIKSCC gave a call for "*Chakka Jam*" (Block the roads) on November 5, 2020, and "*Dilli Chalo*" on November 26–27, 2020. By this time, the kisan movement had started spreading all over India (see for details, Tiwana, 2021).

After this call by the AIKSCC, the Modi government held regular meetings with farmers' organisations of Punjab, and on October 14, 2020, and

January 22, 2021, there were 11 rounds of talks between SKM and the central government, without any major outcome except the exposure of the central government relating to its full allegiance to corporates. The process of these meetings was stopped on January 22, 2021, and during this period, the farmers had already started the *morcha* from November 24, 2020, at the Delhi borders. In this struggle to reach Delhi, the farmers of Haryana helped the Punjab farmers in a big way. The farmers held the *morcha* (blockade) at Singhu, Tikri, Ghazipur, and Shahjahanpur borders from November 27, 2020, to December 11, 2021. During this period, more than 700 farmers/persons sacrificed their lives in the struggle, and they were mostly marginal and small farmers. After the announcement regarding repealing of the three agricultural laws on November 19, 2021, and after getting the letter from the union government, the SKM announced the postponement of the *morcha* at Delhi and vacated the borders of Delhi on December 12, 2021. The three laws were repealed through the Farm Laws Repeal Bill, 2021, on November 29 in both the houses of the parliament.

Achievements

In 1947, the Punjabis lost their nears and dears, property, business, and mother land. This was true for all Punjabi sufferers regardless of whether they were Muslims or Sikhs or Hindus or of any other religion. Resettlement of homeless Punjabis became a big problem both socially and economically, and till date, these people have pain in their hearts of this uprooting. Against this background, after independence there were conflicts and tussles between religious communities, but there were almost no riots on religious basis in Punjab. So in this context, the communal politics of the ruling party was not able to break the unity of the people in the struggle against the three farm laws. This *morcha* had successfully united people from different communities, religions, castes, states, regions, and organisations.

The significance of this kisan movement is that this was a peaceful democratic means of struggle, and the participation of ladies and other sections is well noted by many writers. This well-organised movement defeated all ideological, legal, and physical attacks on it. The mature leadership with the help of people not only scuttled all the nefarious attacks on this *morcha* but also built its counter platforms and structures.

The way through which the nexus between corporates and the ruling BJP party/ruling classes has been exposed was par excellence. It is established that a strong movement can more successfully teach the common people about socio-economic realities than universities and other institutions. However, these institutions are very important to expose the grassroots and complex phenomena, which are otherwise not in the capacity of the common man to understand. Moreover, the people gained awareness about the attack on peasantry, on crops, and above all on land. That is why the issues were

centred around crops, generations, and land. This *morcha* has become the source of huge writings. In the last four to five decades, no other movement has produced such a large academic material.

This *morcha* also taught that traditions are very important for the mobilisation of people for a rightful struggle and for survival in the struggle. The role of songs, poetry, theatre, writers, artists, and the *langar* and the role of people from local areas and Haryana in this *morcha* have influenced many already published writings.

This *morcha* was able to mobilise all village classes that have non-antagonistic contradictions. Marginal, small, and medium farmers participated in large number, and along with these farmers, agricultural labourers, artisans, mechanics, and middle class people from villages also participated in this struggle continuously, sometimes in large numbers and sometimes in less number. The fact about the participation of marginal, small, and medium farmers can be ascertained from the farmers who died during this *morcha* as they were generally marginal, small, or medium farmers. Rich and extra-large farmers (who belong to the aforementioned socially and economically dominant classes in Punjab villages) also participated in this *morcha*, but their participation was not the same as that of the small, marginal, and medium farmers (Dhawale, 2021). Firstly, in the *kisan morcha* at Delhi, we observed that some of the young boys belonging to these farming families were showing off their big and decorated costly tractors fitted with costly sound systems. They were staying at comfortable places. Generally, there was less physical participation by rich and extra-large farmers (of the dominant two classes in villages) as compared to marginal, small, and medium farmers, and they preferred to stay at Delhi for very few days and at comfortable places, even in hotels. However, they financially supported the struggle. Leaders of some unions who belonged to the large and extra-large farmers categories had to participate regularly. Some leaders of some non-left political parties participated occasionally so as to remain relevant in politics, but they were staying at comfortable places. We observed that the tractors that stayed for a long time were not extraordinary, and simple trollies were used as stay places/temporary houses in this *morcha* at Delhi. The other classes from urban areas like small and medium traders, middle-class people, employees, retired military men, teachers from schools and higher education institutions, students, factory workers, advocates, and persons associated with artistic organisations took active part in this *morcha*. Even people from other countries participated directly and indirectly in this struggle. The Punjabi diaspora also played an important role by supporting this *morcha* financially and by organising rallies in different countries all over the world. One of the major achievements of this *morcha* is that it successfully mobilised people across the world against these pro-corporate and anti-people agriculture laws.

The most important achievement is the repealing of the three agriculture-related laws. Throughout India, a perception existed that the decision/law passed by the Modi government will not be taken back even if there is a very strong democratic struggle. Rather people who took part in this type of struggle are harassed, put behind bars, victimised, and humiliated through illegitimate actions. In addition, thousands and thousands of criminal cases were filed against the farmers and farmers were crushed under the jeep, but the SKM did not get derailed and continued its peaceful and democratic movement. More than 700 persons sacrificed their lives, and the *morcha* was continuously going on till the repealing of the laws.

The SKM successfully raised the demands regarding MSP, assured purchase of crops on MSP, anti-people Electricity Ordinance 2020, implementation of the Swaminathan Commission report, debt burden on farmers, burning of paddy stubbles in Punjab, the inference in state subjects by the centre, prices of diesel for agricultural purposes, and withdrawal of all cases against persons and leaders of farmers during this movement.

This movement has created a common platform for major kisan organisations of Punjab to protest on different issues of farmers from time to time. Furthermore, this movement has created a unity through struggle among large numbers of farmers' organisations across India.

Another major achievement of this *kisan morcha* at the village level in Punjab is that units of kisan organisations (may be any) have formed in all the villages of Punjab. As there is no village that has not participated in this *morcha*, there is no village in Punjab that does not have a unit of kisan sabha/organisation, and some villages have units of more than one organisation. The organisation is the alternative to the process of individualisation due to capitalist development in agriculture and the social breakdown of villages. These organisations are and will become the source of social and economic support for the villagers in the time of distress/emergency. Let us see the extent to which it will succeed.

Part III

Challenges before SKM and village community in Punjab in future

It is very clear that the problems of farmers and crisis in agriculture are not over or solved with the success of this *kisan morcha*. Actually with the repealing of the three agriculture laws, the situation was restored on June 5, 2020, but all other issues are still pending. The leadership of the SKM also perceived this, and that is why they postponed the agitation. The issues relating to MSP, assured purchase of crops on MSP, making agriculture a source to live a dignified life, debt burden, and many others are still pending. The farmers should not be in doubt that there will be no attack on peasantry and

agriculture by corporates in the coming days; rather, they should be ready to fight against these attacks in the future.

The class contradictions that were present before this *kisan morcha* are still in existence. As mentioned earlier, now the issue of land reforms is not that much central or important for farmers' unions or agricultural workers' unions, but the issue of land and its utilisation is still important. The agricultural unions are fighting for the share of landless dalits in common agricultural cultivated lands as generally they are not given one-third share in this village land. Their share in this land is being used by landowning farmers by hook or by crook. That struggle is ongoing in many villages and sometimes becomes very serious (Singh, 2022). And immediately after the postponement of this *morcha*, during the Kharif season of 2022, there was conflict between farmers and landless agricultural labourers in regard to plantation charges of paddy. In many villages, the resolutions (even within the premises of religious institutions) were passed against these agricultural labourers, and even a call was given to boycott these labourers if they did not agree to the terms and conditions of the resolution. In this context, the role of migratory labour in Punjab can be assessed. The migratory labour, which is now a significant part of the rural labour market, did not participate in this *morcha*. And during this *morcha* and otherwise also, the socio-economic situation of this migratory labour in Punjab and in their native places is not part of the discourse of any farmers' organisations and agricultural workers' unions. This is a politically, economically, and socially neglected section of village society. The SKM and leaders of different unions must think about this section and act. So far, as the SKM is particularly concerned for the progressive kisan organisations of Punjab, the challenge is in bringing together these classes on a common platform to fight against corporates and for the betterment of the village community, especially on issues relating to education, health, drinking water, sanitation, and other amenities. The issue of building unity among agricultural labourers and marginal and small farmers to get rid of capitalistic exploitation is a big challenge.

Another challenge is to maintain the unity in the future among large number of kisan organisations of Punjab so that the struggle on farmers' issues can be built again and again whenever time demands. As the attack of corporates on farmers, agricultural labourers, rural artisans, and agriculture will be continuous, this unity is very important in the present times to save them. This issue is serious in light of the work of many organisations, which is highlighted by the participation of many kisan organisations in the Punjab Assembly elections of 2021.

Certainly, this *morcha* provided opportunity to the people, organisations, and many institutions to work together to watch the interests of farmers in particular and the common man in general. Many lessons can be learned from this by the organisations, activists, and institutions in regard to how to secure the rights of people.

Appendix

Table 5.3 Land Utilisation Pattern in Punjab (Area in 000 ha)

Items	1960– 1961	1970– 1971	1980– 1981	1990– 1991	2000– 2001	2012– 2013	2018– 2019
Total geographical area	5036	5036	5036	5036	5036	5036	5036
Fallow land	313	139	45	110	43	45	91
Net sown area	3757	4053	4191	4218	4250	4150	4119
Total cropped area	4732	5678	6763	7502	7941	7870	7851
Cropping intensity	126	140	161	178	186	190	191

Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab, Various Issues.

Table 5.4 Yield of Principal Crops in Punjab (kg/ha)

Crop	1960– 1961	1970– 1971	1980– 1981	1990– 1991	2000– 2001	2012– 2013	2018– 2019
Wheat	1244	2238	2730	3715	4563	4724	5188
Rice	1009	1765	2733	3229	3506	3998	4132
Maize	1135	1555	1602	1786	2793	3680	3639
Barley	768	7022	1640	2754	3393	3863	3715
Gram	813	797	582	744	953	1245	1331
Bajra	472	1176	1244	1107	893	895	651
Sugarcane*	365.4	411.7	552.6	594.1	642.5	588.8	818.6
Cotton (A)	269	391	329	481	437	577	779
Cotton (D)	270	338	241	285	408	458	603
Groundnut	925	970	1249	816	879	1850	1980

Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab, Various Issues.

Note: * Yield in quintals/ha.

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Debanjan Roy

6 Protest-landscape of the farmers' movement in Haryana

Mahabir S. Jaglan and Rajeshwari

Introduction

The three farm laws, namely “Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill”, “Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill”, and “Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act”, first promulgated as ordinances in June 2020 and subsequently passed by the parliament and assented by the president of India in September 2020, initially met a stiff resistance in Punjab. The farm unions of this agriculturally developed state of India dubbed these three farm laws as anti-farmers and took a lead in the campaign against these laws. It was here in Moga the seeds of the forthcoming pan-India farmers’ agitation were sown when 32 farmer unions decided to begin a collective struggle against the new farm laws (Times News Network, 2021). They carried out an about two-month agitation in Punjab between September and November 2020. On September 25, 2020, farmers across the states in India took to the streets at the call of the All India Kisan Sanghash Coordination Committee (AIKSCC). Realising that their fight was up against a stubborn union government, they gave the call of “*Dilli Chalo*” (March to Delhi) on November 26, 2020, under the aegis of the AIKSCC (Express Web Desk, 2021).

The Punjab farmers’ march to Delhi on November 26, 2020, was marked by a trail of incidents as they were stopped at Haryana borders by the Haryana police equipped with water cannons, multiple barricades of barbed wires, trenches dug on highways, and bunds on roads. Besides these arrangements, in many places in Haryana, the administration blocked roads leading to Delhi and carried out preventive arrests of farmer leaders belonging to the Leftwing Farmers’ Union called the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), different factions of the *Bhartiya Kisan Union* (BKU), and various trade union activists. The purpose of all these operations seemed to be to prevent the entry of agitating Punjab farmers into Delhi and to discourage the Haryana farmers from coming out in solidarity with the agitating farmers from neighbouring states. But Punjab farmers breached the multiple-layer barricades at the Punjab–Haryana border, and farmers from the border area came forward to their help. Punjab farmers had to spend a night at the Khanauri border

on the Patiala–Jind road as Haryana administration placed big boulders on the road. The Haryana farmers of the surrounding area provided them the hospitality and helped in making a sideways passage for their onward journey to Delhi (Sethi, 2020; Deswal, 2021a). The agitators had similar experiences on different routes as they penetrated the interstate border at about a dozen places and passed through Haryana to reach the Delhi–Haryana border.

The BKU (Charuni) agitators started their march in one-day advance (November 25) from Ambala district and breached the multiple barricades erected by the Haryana Police on the Grand Trunk (GT) Road to facilitate the advancement of Punjab farmers towards Delhi. Despite the preventive arrest of their leaders, activists belonging to the AIKS, BKU groups, and other farmer organisations advanced towards Delhi from the western and central parts of Haryana. Initially, they also faced road blockades and detentions by the local police at various places. In fact, the ill-conceived efforts of the Haryana government to block the movement of Punjab farmers at various points generated goodwill for the agitating farmers and positive feedback of the agitation in Haryana. This also created the footprints of the protest-landscape of the farmers' movement in Haryana.

Objectives and methodology of study

This agitation has left an indelible impact on the socio-political space in Haryana. It also left behind various geopolitical questions of research interest such as how did this movement diffuse into different parts of Haryana, why were farmers of certain areas drawn into it more than others, and which were the economic, social, and political forces that shaped the protest-landscape of the farmers' movement in Haryana. The present study attempted to construct the protest-landscape of farmers' agitation as it evolved during the course of year-long protests. It also explored the politico-geographic, economic, and social factors in the evolution and construction of the protest-landscape in the state. The protest-landscape of the farmers' movement has been constructed and analysed on the basis of media news reports, articles, National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) surveys, and observations of writers. Maps depicting the routes of the farmers' movement, location of protest sites, level of agricultural productivity, crop combinations, commodity arrivals in Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) *mandis*, and paddy and wheat procurements were constructed in Arc GIS environment.

Emergence of protest sites

On their onward march to the capital of India ("*Dilli Chalo*"), the agitating farmers of Punjab entered Haryana through various points. The main routes of their passage were the Grand Trunk road (NH 44), Sangrur–Jind road (NH 52 and 352), Dabwali–Sirsa road (NH 9), Mansa–Sirsa road (NH

23), Budhlada–Fatehabad road (NH 21), and Patiala–Kaithal road (NH 11). Passing through northern and northwestern Haryana, all these routes finally merged with either the Panipat–Delhi road or Rohtak–Delhi road (Figure 6.1). The marching cavalcades of farmers’ tractors and their logistics

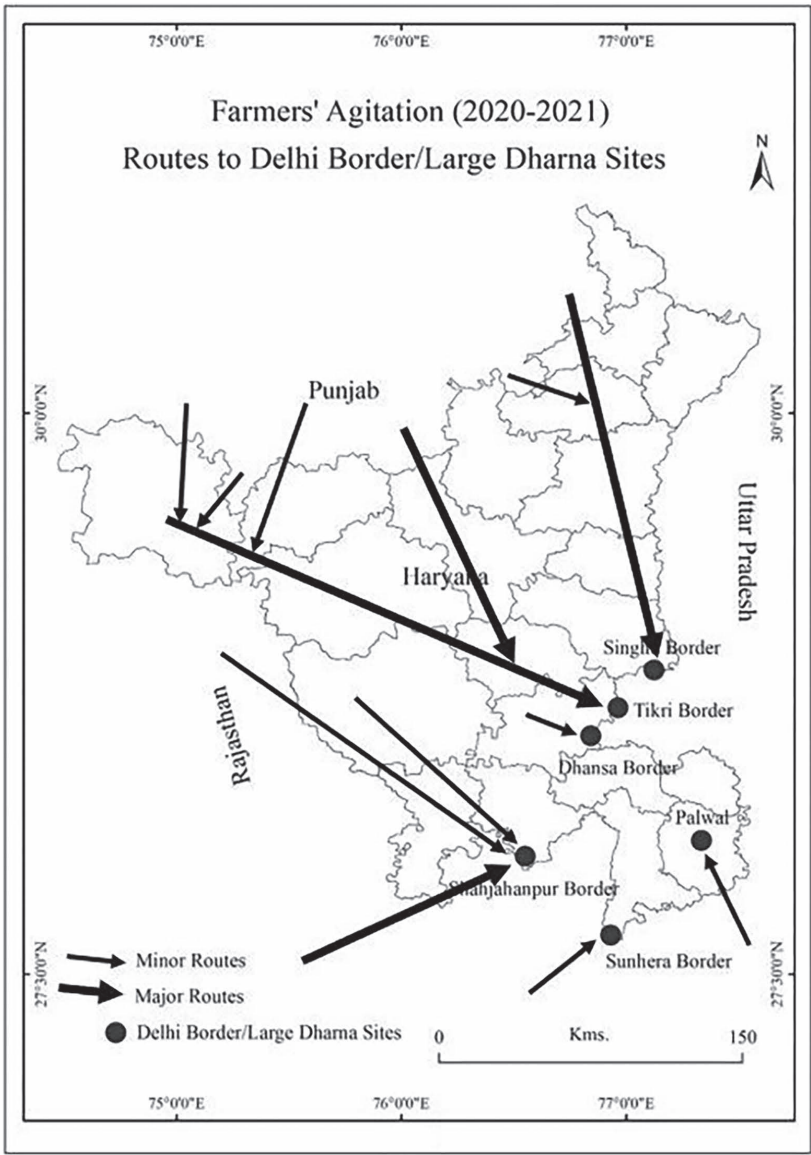


Figure 6.1 Farmers’ Agitation (2020–2021) Routes to the Delhi Border/Large *Dharna* Sites.
Source: Map by authors

finally halted at the multiple-layer barriers of the Delhi–Haryana boarder, i.e., the Singhu border and the Tikri border, respectively. In a couple of days, these borders had a column of tents and temporary hutments stretched along the road for many kilometres near Kundli and Bahadurgarh towns of Haryana (Singh, 2022a). In due course of time, the Singhu border, which mostly housed farmers from Doaba and Manjha, became the largest *dharna* site of the farmers' agitation. The Tikri border, the second largest *dharna* site, had farmers mostly from Malwa and southwestern Punjab. Meanwhile, the passages of the protesting Punjab farmers through north and northwest Haryana became the corridors of interaction and diffusion of the agitation in Haryana.

Even before the march of Punjab farmers, there were three streams of agitating farmers in Haryana that responded to the “*Dilli Chalo*” call and marched towards Delhi. The BKU (Charuni) led the march of the farmers from the northeastern region of Haryana even before the arrival of the Punjab stream, removed a number of police barricades and blockades on the GT road, and reached the Singhu border in advance. This had a huge demonstration impact on the farmers of the agriculturally developed GT road belt districts of Haryana. Consequently, a large number of farmers even not attached to farmer unions joined the *dharna* at the Singhu border and supplied ration, milk, vegetables, and other logistics from the surrounding area (Rahar, 2020).

Another stream of protesting farmers emerged from western and central Haryana led by the AIKS, various factions of BKU, and other farmers' groups. These areas had a recent history of protests and agitation of farmers on issues of diverse nature. There were police crackdowns on the night of November 23–24 on the farmers' leaders in Rohtak, Bhiwani, Hisar, and Jind districts, and their large-scale pre-emptive detentions were aimed at preventing their participation in the “*Dilli Chalo*” march. Their movement towards Delhi was also obstructed by multiple police barricades and earthen bunds. Despite all this, the agitating farmers' groups moved on and converged on the Rohtak–Delhi highway and reached the Tikri border to join their Punjab brethren (Rahar, 2020). A group of farmers from this stream along with the local farmers also sat on *dharna* at the Dhansa border.

A column of farmers belonging to the Jai Kisan movement marched from the Ahirwal region towards Gurugram. Being a small group and due to the lack of local support, its leaders were detained and the group dispersed by the police. Later on, this group reassembled and led the *dharna* at the Shahjahanpur border on the Jaipur–Delhi road. There was a sizeable presence of Rajasthan and southwestern Haryana farmers on this agitation site. Another *dharna* site in south Haryana was at the GT road in Palwal district where farmers from Brij area and Madhya Pradesh camped. Mewat farmers also had their share in the historic farmers' movement. Drawn from both Haryana and Rajasthan parts of the Mewat region, they camped at the Sunhera border on the Nuh–Alwar road. The agitation on all these sites of *dharna* was conducted under the guidance of the newly

formed apex body of farmers, *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM). Figure 6.1 shows the main routes of the farmers' movement through Haryana and their convergence points near the Haryana–Delhi border and other main *dharna* places.

Evolution of the protest-landscape

The concept of “protest-landscape” connects political action with space. It is essentially a connotation referring to the transformation of tangible features of a public space assigned for sit-in/demonstration of the people protesting against certain issues in a city (Harrouk, 2020). Figure 6.2 depicts the location of the protest sites in Haryana both at the borders and at toll plazas. The protest-landscape of the farmers' movement (2020–2021) in Haryana was not merely constituted by the *dharna* sites on Delhi and other borders. It had much larger geographical and social dimensions. The spatial diffusion of the agitation in the state effectively began with the advancement of columns of agitating farmers through different routes. The barricading of these routes, use of water cannons to disperse the farmers, and deployment of excessive police force along the routes had a deep influence on the psyche of common farmers and people. Their interest in the farmers' issues further grew as large contingents of farmers camped at Delhi borders on the Haryana side and blocked the national highways. The demonstrative effect and empathy with the farmers' cause were so huge that large numbers of farmers from the surrounding areas rushed to the *dharna* sites carrying ration, vegetables, milk, etc., and many of them camped on these sites. Even those who were not in direct contact with the *dharna* sites were connected to the day today proceedings of the agitation through social media.

Within a couple of weeks of *dharnas* on the Delhi border, the agitation spread across the length and breadth of the state, except Gurugram and Faridabad districts (Kumar, 2020). A large number of toll plazas in north-eastern, central, and western Haryana were made toll free and turned into picketing spots for the local farmers. This mode of protest became quite popular not only among the farmers but also among the middle class that was irked by the hefty toll charges. The *dharnas* sprung on as many as 23 toll plazas in the state, mostly located in the northern and central parts of Haryana (Figure 6.2). Khatkar toll plazas on NH 352 in Jind district, Mayyar toll plaza on NH 9 in Hisar district, Bastara toll plaza on NH 44, and Kitlana toll plaza on the Bhiwani–Charkhi Dadri road were among the points that witnessed large gatherings and vibrant demonstrations. The toll plaza pickets in a way decentralised the agitation and made it easier to participate for all those who could not travel long distance to reach the border *dharna* sites, particularly the elderly people and women. These toll plazas frequently attracted the national leadership of the SKM and local political leaders supporting the farmers' agitation. In a way, these *dharnas* became the centres of diffusion and feedback of the movement.

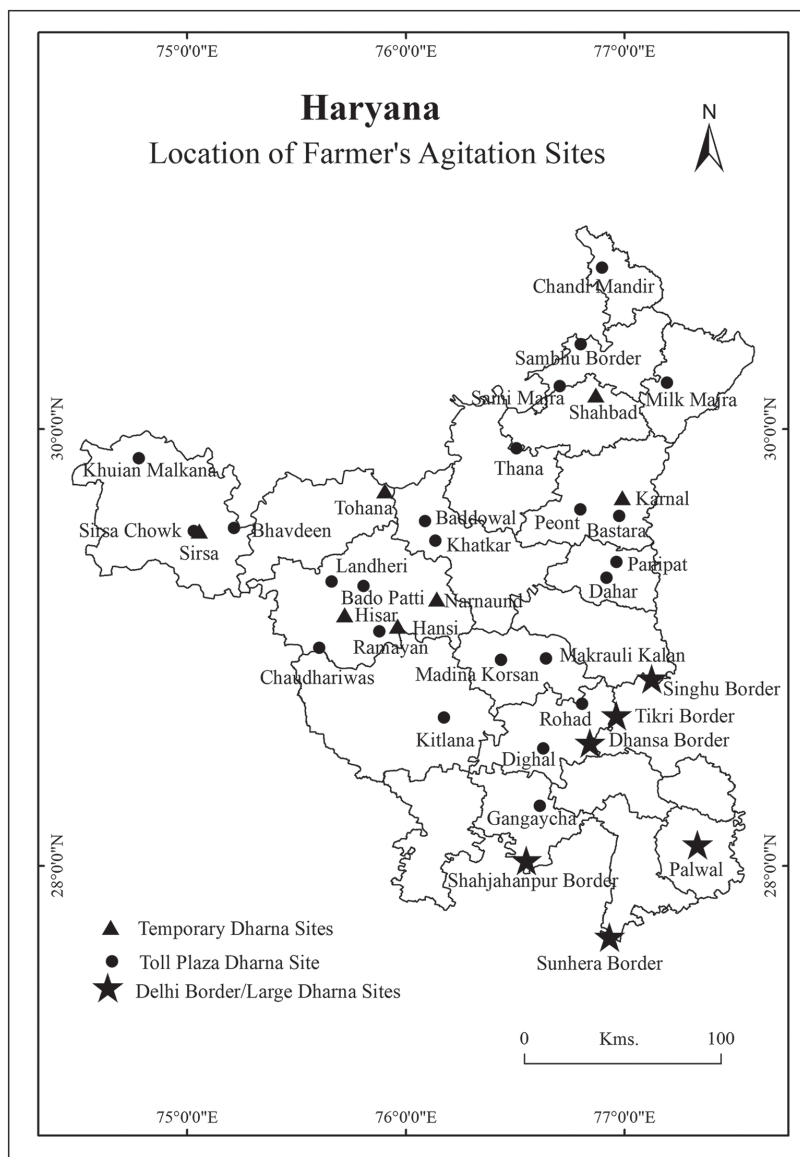


Figure 6.2 Location of Farmers' Agitation Sites in Haryana.

Source: Map by authors

Besides the borders and toll plazas, the protests erupted at many places in the process of intensification of the movement and boycott calls of ruling party leaders. At many places, the protests snowballed into big tussles and administrative crisis. There was a three-day demonstration and picketing by

farmers at Mini Secretariat, Karnal, in protest against the brutal lathi-charge at Bastara toll plaza. Similar sorts of pickets were organised by the agitating farmers at Hisar, Hansi, Narnaund, Sirsa, and Shahbad Markanda to protest against the political events of the ruling party leaders. In fact, over the period of time, the farmers' agitation transformed into a mass movement, and the epicentre of the protests shifted from east to west across north Haryana.

In the beginning of the agitation, Kurukshetra, with big support from the surrounding area, was the epicentre of the farmers' protests in Haryana. The largest group of protesting farmers, mainly led by the BKU (Charuni), emerged from this area. The farmers of this region were more politically conscious about the implications of the new farm laws than the other parts of the state. The centre of agitation shifted to Jind as it intensified and protests started against the ruling alliance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) leaders (Siwach, 2021). Rural Jind was the stronghold of JJP, but the farmers were dismayed that Dushyant Chautala, deputy chief minister, did not support them in their fight against the farm laws enacted by the central government (Kumar, 2020). The farmers protested quite vehemently against the presence of the ruling party leaders in the public space. After the second wave of COVID-19, Hisar district emerged as the core of the farmers' agitation in the state (Siwach, 2021). The leaders of the ruling parties, particularly that of JJP, launched a counter-offensive to reclaim their lost political turf in western Haryana (Hisar, Bhiwani, Fatehabad, and Sirsa districts). The recurring provocations by the agitation opposing politicians in the region met a stiff resistance from the resolute farmers under the direct leadership of the SKM. In fact, the SKM leaders saw the incidences of provoking farmers as preplanned efforts of the government to disrupt the movement by shifting the focus from Delhi borders to frequent face-offs in the interior parts of Haryana (Joshua, 2021).

Factors in the evolution of the protest-landscape

The protest-landscape of the farmers' movement in Haryana may be defined by the action space (protest sites), the areas the participants belong to, and the intensity of their participation. The action space of the movement is easily identifiable, as it is constituted by the location of the protest sites, that is *dharnas* at Delhi and other borders, toll plaza *dharnas*, and temporary *dharnas* (Figure 6.2). The participants involved in action at the protest sites mostly came from northeastern, central, and northwestern parts of Haryana and the areas in the vicinity of the Singhu and Tikri border. The participation level of farmers in the movement was low in south Haryana, particularly in Ahirwal region. There are various political, economic, and social factors that have contributed in constructing the protest-landscape and the spatial dimensions of the farmers' movement in Haryana. The following section analyses the factors that shaped the protest-landscape of the movement.

Political factors

There is a chronology of farmers' protests that preceded the diffusion of the farmers' agitation in 2020–2021 in the state of Haryana. The political consciousness and experience gained by the farmers through *dharnas* and protests during the preceding couple of years had a cumulative effect on the diffusion and sustenance of the farmers' movement in the state.

Though, at a smaller scale than Punjab, the protests against the ordinances of new farm laws in Haryana had started in July 2020. In northeastern region of the state, BKU (Charuni) group educated the farmers about the ill-effects of new farm laws and protested against these laws in tandem with Punjab farmers till September 2020. One of the demonstrations of this group was brutally lathi-charged by the police at Pipli, Kurukshetra. The farmers in this region were also upset with the cumbersome process of crop registration and procurement of wheat and paddy. The paddy procurement limit of 25 quintals, non-release of the dues of sugarcane farmers in Ambala district, and non-procurement of sunflower crop were the issues that had irked the farmers in this region for a couple of years. They had stopped the supply of milk and vegetables to towns for 10 days in protest against non-implementation of the Swaminathan Committee report by the government (Siwach, 2020). The continuous mobilisation of farmers against the policies of the government since September 2020 provided a pedestal for launching the farmers' agitation in Kurukshetra, Ambala, and Yamunanagar districts that subsequently spread to other parts of the state (Singh, 2020b).

The agriculture in western and northwestern areas of the state (Bhiwani, Hisar, Sirsa, and Fatehabad districts) has been vulnerable to droughts, heat waves, and pest attacks. During the preceding couple of years of farmers' movement, this area witnessed various agitations of farmers demanding compensation for damaged crops and disbursement of compensation by private insurance agencies. Led by the AIKS, *Akhil Bhartiya Swaminathan Sangharsh Samiti*, and the local units of BKU, these agitations mobilised the farmers politically and prepared them to fight for their legitimate demands (Siwach, 2020). The government scheme of crop rotation and restriction of paddy cultivation in the blocks falling in the dark zone for the conservation of groundwater resources had also irked the common farmers. Although paddy has not been the main crop of this region, farmers started growing it because of frequent failures of cotton due to pest attacks.

The voters and supporters of JJP, in general, were not pleased that, after the 2019 assembly election results, its leadership jumped into the bandwagon of the BJP to form the government in Haryana. The discontent among the peasantry against the JJP leaders turned into a strong sense of betrayal as they chose to support the new farm laws of the central government. Consequently, the Jind Hisar area, politically dominated by JJP, witnessed very vibrant protests of farmers under the leadership of the SKM during the course

of agitation (Kumar, 2020; Siwach, 2021). Unlike Punjab, where the Congress government was sympathetic to the farmers' cause, the ruling parties in Haryana were seen as anti-farmer as during the course of agitation, many FIRs were registered against the farmers for murder, sedition, destruction of public property, etc. The farmers saw all this as a tool of repression and a ploy of creating division in peasantry by the BJP-JJP government – Jat/non-Jat political polarisation (Sharma, 2021).

The farmers of south and southwestern Haryana did not benefit much by the procurement scheme. The tradable agricultural produce of the region like bajra and mustard was not covered under the procurement scheme of the union government. The Jai Kisan movement of Swaraj Abhiyan led a 52-day *dharna* in Rewari in 2018 for the procurement of bajra and mustard. The state government yielded to the demands of the farmers to some extent as the ruling BJP also had sizeable political support in the region. In 2019 when the Haryana government came up with the scheme of partial procurement of these commodities on minimum support price (MSP), this farmer outfit protested and succeeded in raising its quota limit of mustard procurement from 30% to 50% of farmers' total production (Siwach, 2020). But despite the activism of Jai Kisan, the participation of Ahirwal farmers in the farmers' movement (2020–2021) was not encouraging. This may be attributed to the fact that the BJP had already divided the peasantry on the caste line and carved out a strong political constituency in this region as evidenced by its impressive performance in 2014 and 2019 assembly elections (Kawoosa, 2019). The ruling party maintained its stronghold in Ahirwal region even at the peak of the farmers' agitation. It is evident from the fact that the chief minister, who could not hold rally in Karnal district during the agitation, and other functionaries of the ruling party organised their political programmes in this region (Krishnan, 2021).

However, the farmers of two districts of southern Haryana, Nuh and Palwal, were not in sync with their fellow farmers in Ahirwal region. Mewat has been the laboratory of divisive politics of the Sangh Parivar in Haryana during recent years. The SKM organised two big Kisan Mahapanchayats in Mewat region to mobilise the farmers to join the agitation and gave a call to farmers to “choke Delhi” from the south direction (Bhardwaj, 2021). But the state administration's highhandedness and the BJP's all-out efforts to divide the farmers through communal propaganda did not allow the agitation to flourish in Mewat to the full extent (Khanna, 2021). The Palwal *dharna* also remained subdued as it had a very small catchment area in Haryana and did not get adequate support of farmers from the adjoining area of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh too.

Economic factors

The three new farm laws passed by the parliament were perceived to have adversely affected most of the farmers in agriculturally developed areas. The

farmers in the commercial grain farming areas feared phasing out of traditional APMC *mandis*, dismantling of the procurement system, and aborting the MSP scheme. That is why the farmers' movement received a much stronger response in northwest India than the other parts of the country (IANS, 2021). Within northwestern India as well, the response to the movement was geographically homogeneous in Punjab, but in Haryana it was quite regionally differentiated.

Unlike Punjab, the regional imbalance in the level of agricultural development is more pronounced in Haryana. It is evident from Figure 6.3 that there is almost a north–south divide in terms of level of agricultural productivity in the state except Palwal district in the extreme southeast. The agriculturally developed districts in the state stretch across north Haryana, from Yamunanagar district in the northeast to Sirsa in the northwest, whereas most districts in the southern half of the state have low agricultural productivity. So quite naturally farmers from agriculturally developed areas in the north were much more wary about the new farm laws than their counterparts in the southern region of the state. The principle “the higher the crop yield, the greater the discomfort of farmers with new farm laws” also explains the geographical concentration of the farmers' agitation in northwest India (Shagun & Sengupta, 2020).

Besides agricultural productivity, the regional difference in the cropping pattern in the state (Figure 6.4) also influenced the participation of farmers in the agitation. The lack of irrigation facilities (both surface and groundwater resources) in south and southwestern Haryana is the main factor in making it a mixed crop region that mainly grows coarse food grains (mainly bajra), mustard, pulses, and hardy crops, which are not covered under the procurement policy of the central government. This could be one of the reasons that farmers in these areas showed weak response to the farmers' agitation. On the other hand, the eastern and northeastern parts of the state have the dominance of two-crop (wheat–rice) combination. These fine cereals also have a significant share in the cropping pattern of the northwest region extending along the Ghaggar River in Fatehabad and Sirsa districts, where cotton is also an important crop. The wheat and rice (the main procurement commodities) farmers of the state had a natural inclination to join the farmers' agitation in large numbers.

There are spatial variations in the size and structure of the APMC *mandis* in Haryana (Figure 6.5). The overall quantum of tradable commodities arrivals is quite high, and wheat and paddy arrivals dominate the agricultural markets in the districts of north Haryana. On the other hand, the quantity of tradable commodities arrival in *mandis* of south and southwestern districts is much smaller than that in northern districts. Besides wheat, the main tradable commodities of these districts are mustard, bajra, and guar. Farmers from many districts of south Haryana had a lukewarm response to the farmers' movement (2020–2021) as they have inadequate surplus production for sale in the *mandis*. Hence, the argument that new

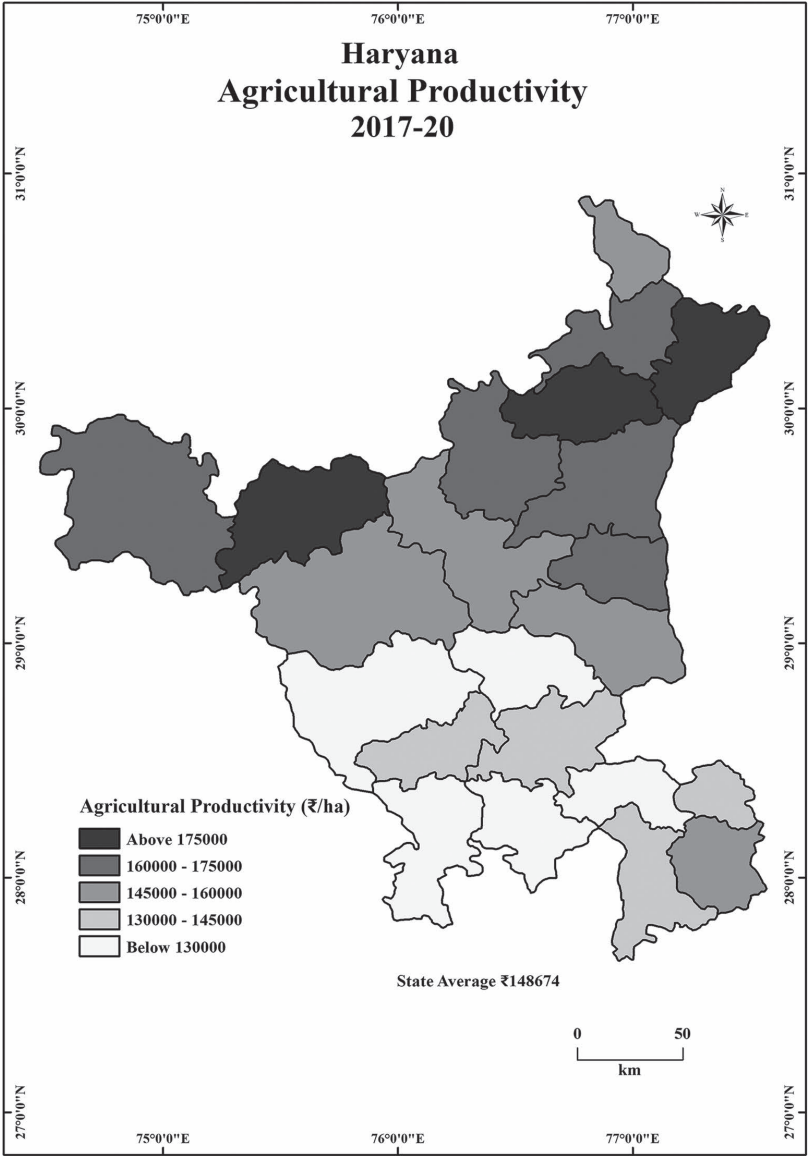


Figure 6.3 Level of Agricultural Productivity in Haryana.

Source: Map by authors

farm laws would destroy the APMC *mandis* had little relevance to them. Furthermore, the tradable commodities of this area (bajra, mustard, etc.) are not covered under the central government’s procurement scheme, and the state government had started their limited procurement only recently.



Figure 6.4 Crop Combination Pattern in Haryana (2017–2020).

Source: Map by authors

Most of the wheat and rice procurement of the state comes from the northern part (Figure 6.6). Paddy is procured mostly from the northeastern districts of the state. However, wheat procurement in the state has a much larger geographical base as it covers the entire northern and central parts

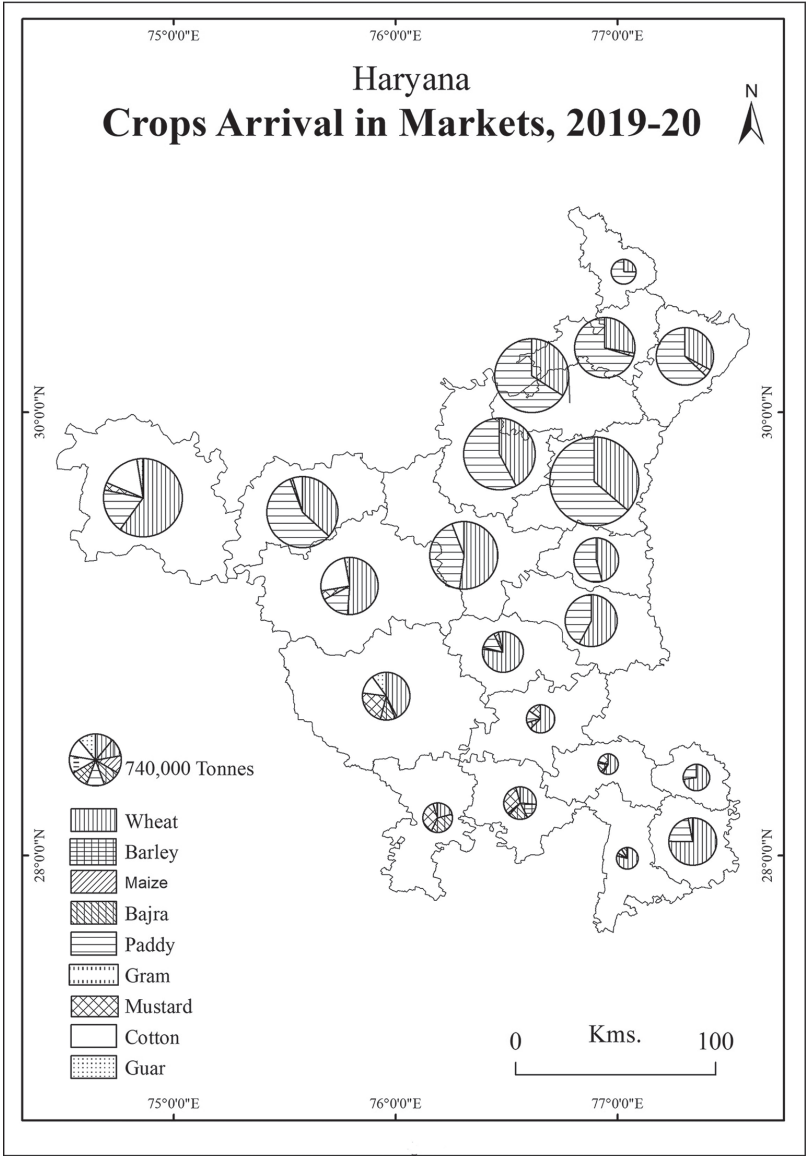


Figure 6.5 Arrival of Crops in Markets in Haryana (2019–2020).

Source: Map by authors

and the districts in the extreme southeast. Farmers benefitting from the procurement of agricultural commodities on MSP in north and central Haryana responded most enthusiastically and lent their solid support to the farmers’ agitation (Shagun & Sengupta, 2020).

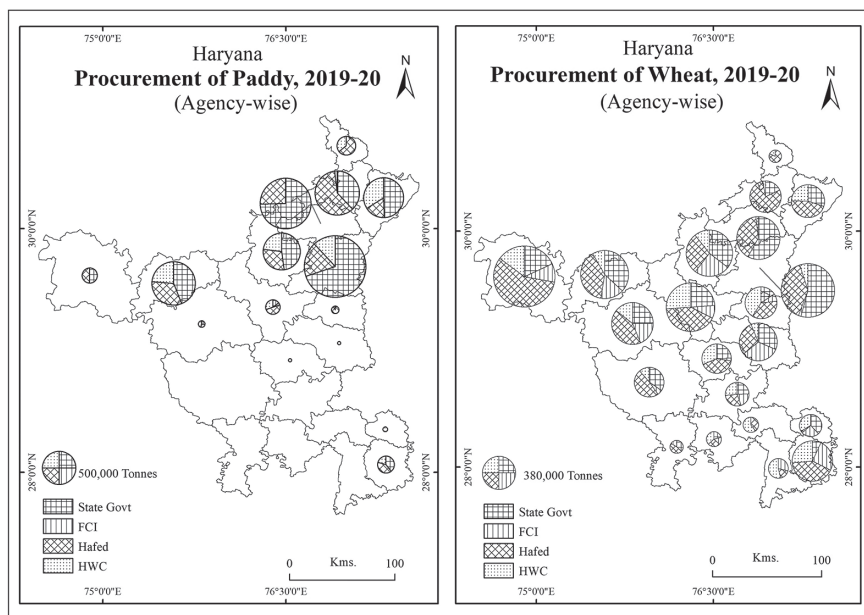


Figure 6.6 Procurement of Paddy and Wheat in Haryana (2019–2020) (Agency-wise).

Source: Map by authors

Social factors

There are two social factors that have been identified to have played a crucial role in shaping the protest-landscape and sustenance of the farmers' movement in Haryana, namely the support of *Khap* panchayats and the participation of women. The *khaps* of Haryana have been generally known for their conservative approach and regressive steps as there have been instances when they demanded amendments to the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, to incorporate their customs and traditions, and some of them at times have even supported honour-killing (Jaglan, 2010). But politically cornered since the Jat reservation fiasco in 2016, the *khaps* rather adopted a supportive stance to the farmers' movement in 2020–2021. It must be noted that the *khaps* dominate the social arena of peasantry in at least seven districts in the east-central, central, and western parts of Haryana. Their support to the agitation in terms of providing food and shelter and augmenting the crowd on *dharna* sites was crucial to its sustenance and widening the protest-landscape in central Haryana from the Delhi border in the east to the Rajasthan border in the west (Rai & Dilshad, 2021).

Initially, the *khaps* did not have any reaction to the three farm laws promulgated as ordinances in June and the bills passed by the parliament in September 2020. It was only after the farmers' *dharnas* at the Delhi border that

these social forums started showing their concern and supported the demand of the farmers' gatherings to repeal the new farm laws (see for details, Singh, 2022b). By this time, even the farmers in the state not associated with the farm unions had come out in large numbers in open support of the protesting farmers on the Delhi border. On December 1, 2020, the heads of 30 *khaps* of Haryana met in Rohtak to announce their support to the agitating farmers. They vowed/resolved to provide accommodation, food, water, medicine, and security to protesting women farmers and appealed the central government to reconsider the three farm laws (NDTV, 2020). The issue of dispossession of farmers' land through corporatisation of agriculture raised by the farm unions appealed the peasantry instantly and was strengthened through the campaign of the *khaps* (Sharma, 2021). The *Khap Panchayats* gave further boost to the farmers' agitation in Haryana in the wake of the attack on farmers and the SKM leader Rakesh Tikait by goons at the Ghazipur border on January 28, 2021 (Siwach & Tiwari, 2021). In their *mahapanchayat* at Kandela village in Jind and other places, various *khaps* pledged to support the agitation by sending at least one person from every family to *dharna* sites and socially boycotting BJP and JJP leaders in Haryana (Rahar, 2021). Interestingly, the *khaps* gave unconditional support to the agitation in the form of logistics and mobilisation of farmers without intervening in the course of the agitation chartered out by the SKM leadership. Some news reports even suggested that they refused to oblige when the BJP leadership solicited the support of some *khap* leaders to malign the SKM leadership and counter-mobilise the farmers against the movement (Arnimesh, 2021; Mogha, 2022).

One of the big take away for Haryana society was the unprecedented participation of women in the farmers' movement in various capacities. They actively participated in organisation of "Women Farmers' Day" on January 18, 2021; celebrated International Women's Day on March 8, 2021, at *dharna* sites; and organised *Kisan Sansad* (Farmers' Parliament) at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi (The Wire, 2021). There were multiple modes of women's participation in the farmers' movement – stay at the border *dharna* sites for months or weeks by rotation, daily commutation to border and toll plaza *dharna* sites, participation in temporary *dharnas* and protests against ruling party leaders, and augmenting the supply line of food and logistics for protesters. The Tikri border of Delhi had a very strong presence of women farmers, mostly belonging to the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan). It also had a sizeable gathering of women from Rohtak, Jhajjar, and Jind districts of Haryana. The Singhu border had a good presence of women from Sonipat and Panipat districts. Women held the fort on the toll plazas in central and western Haryana, Khatkar, Mayyar, Kitlana, Rohad, Makrauli, and Madina, to name a few of them. But women from north-eastern Haryana, the epicentre of the farmers' agitation in the beginning, did not have sizeable participation of women at toll plazas and border *dharnas*.

The phenomenal participation of women farmers from Haryana in the farmers' agitation gives a heart-warming feeling to the progressive-democratic people and makes a curious case study for the social scientists. The women

participants in the agitation were not mere spectators as they took the farm laws as a conspiracy meant for dispossession of their meagre land and livelihood (Sangwan, 2021). Their remarkable participation in the agitation is a landmark in the context of the high gender gap in labour participation and resource ownership as women contribute 45% of agriculture labour but own merely 2% of land resources (Jain et al., 2022). In a state where unequal gender relations render women's contribution invisible, they not only claimed their identities as "farmers" but also demonstrated their prolonged and incomparable contribution visible. Saroj Devi of Khatkar village in Jind district puts the participation of Haryana women in the agitation in perspective as she said, "The profession of farming is not defined by gender. Our fields don't produce crops differently if tended by women and men. Many men and women from Punjab are protesting. Why should we sit at home?" (Deswal, 2021b).

Quite evidently, the immediate inspiration for participation of Haryanvi women farmers in the agitation came from the contingents of Punjabi women farmers as they stayed and interacted with the local women while passing through Haryana. Local women activists organised *Pink Dharna* at Rohtak and inspired women to come forward in support of the agitation (Singh, 2021). In the words of All India Democratic Women's Association leader Jagmati Sangwan, "women were attracted to the movement as active participants and not passive followers brought by their respective family patriarchs". The new farm laws posed a genuine threat to small landholdings, and women aspired to have a share in them were to be severely affected by the farm laws (Rajlakshmi, 2021b). The active participation of women farmers at *dharna* sites made them to realise their strength and internalise their worth. In the words of Sudesh Kandela, a 55-year-old woman, "I didn't know [earlier] what I was capable of beyond the expectations of me as a woman, a wife and mother" (Bhowmick, 2021). Surprisingly, all this was happening in the *khap*-dominated areas, and some of their leaders also encouraged women participation in the agitation.

So what exactly explains the strong participation of women in the farmers' movement in east-central, some parts of western, and southern Haryana and their invisibility in the northeastern region? It may be well understood in the context of women labour force participation in agriculture in the state. During 2017–2018, about two-thirds of rural women were engaged in agriculture and allied activities with a large regional variation. The rural women work participation rate was higher in the districts of western and central Haryana, that is Hisar, Sirsa, Fatehabad, Bhiwani, Jind, Panipat, Karnal, and Sonapat (Government of India, 2019). In north-eastern Haryana districts (Ambala, Yamunanagar, Kurukshetra, Kaithal, and Panchkula), the rural women work participation was less than 5%, much lower than the state average (NSSO, 2019). The withdrawal of women from farm activities in this region reflects their low participation in the farmers' agitation. The lower women participation in this region suggests that women do not claim their identity as "farmers" here as farm activities are largely carried out by migrant labour.

Social capital of the movement

There was a cause that bound them together – the cause of saving mother earth that provides them their livelihood and gives them the reason to be proud of the fact that they feed millions. They not only defeated a powerful government of India, but they also won the hearts of each other and gave a hope of forging the unity of people. It was the social capital generated by the farmers' movement that developed the edifice for sustaining the historical and longest ever people's agitation in India. The term "Social Capital" was used about a century ago (Hanifan, 1916). It may be viewed as the links, shared values, and understanding in the society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and to work together. It is about the values of social network, bonding similar people together, and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity (Grootaert, 2001). The location of farmers' *dharnas* towards the Haryana side of the Delhi borders created unique social spaces – the places of contact and interaction between Punjab and Haryana farmers, and local people and agitators on *dharna* sites. The interaction in these newly created social spaces cohesion between communities that were never in direct socio-spatial contact and led to the creation of social capital that sustained the movement.

The three forms of social capital, bonding, bridging, and linking, were evident in the social spaces created in the protest-landscape of Haryana. The bonding denotes belongingness based on the sense of identity. The farmers' agitation has certainly given the farmers an identity of fighters for the legitimate and just cause. It had bonded together the farming communities of Haryana that have been kept apart by the divisive politics of caste and community tags. The bridging refers to bringing together people of different identities or distant communities. This movement brought together farmers divided by the divisive politics of linguistic-geographic boundaries and religions (Anand, 2020). The farmers of Punjab and Haryana, the farmers of different religious communities – Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, came together, lived together, dined together, and fought for the repeal of what they termed as "black farm laws" (Rajlakshmi, 2021a). The third form of social capital means linking the people further up or down the social order. Interestingly, this farmers' agitation linked the people belonging to different socio-economic sections at least in a functional forum. Many workers' unions came forward in support of the agitation, and there was a sizeable participation of agricultural labourers and workers in the agitation (Singh, 2020a). Besides this, a significant support to the agitation came from the *arhtiyas* (middlemen) and middle class. The quantum of social capital generated through the protest-landscape of the farmers' movement can be gauged by the slogans and often-repeated phrases in the course of the agitation, such as *kisan bhaichara mila diya* (farmers' sense of brotherhood has been strengthened), *ikkatha hokar ladna seekh gae* (learnt to fight together), and *Punjab bada bhai, Haryana chhota bhai* (Punjab elder brother, Haryana younger brother).

Epilogue

The historical movement of Indian farmers (2020–2021), having its action space in the state of Haryana, has been studied from different disciplinary perspectives by social scientists. The present study employed a socio-spatial perspective to construct the protest-landscape of the farmers' agitation and explored the politico-geographic, economic, and social factors contributing to the spatial diffusion and sustenance of the movement in the state. The protest-landscape of the farmers' movement was constructed and analysed based on the media news reports, articles, NSSO surveys, and the observations of authors.

The farmers' agitation that had its genesis in the soil of Punjab spread fast across Haryana as the cavalcades of Punjab farmers passed through the north and central parts of the state on November 25–26, 2020, to reach Delhi. The passage routes of the farmers turned into the corridors of interaction between the farmers of the two states and spatial diffusion of the agitation. But initiation of the farmers' movement in Haryana was not purely spontaneous but inspired by the agitating Punjab farmers. The BKU (Charuni) group from the northeastern region, the AIKS and some other BKU factions in the western and central parts, and Jai Kisan aandolan in southern parts of the state responded to "*Dilli Chalo*" of the AIKSCC and led the protesters' march towards Delhi independently. When farmers of Punjab and Haryana were denied entry into Delhi, the Singhu border on NH 44 and the Tikri border on NH 9 emerged as first protest sites of the farmers' movement in Haryana. The Dhansa border and Palwal in Haryana and Shahjahanpur and Sunhera borders on the Rajasthan side were much smaller *dharna* sites than Singu and Tikri. But the protest-landscape of the agitation was not merely constituted by the border *dharna* sites. As agitation intensified, almost all road toll plazas in the northern, central, and western parts of Haryana were converted into the picketing spots of local farmers, signifying the spatial diffusion and decentralisation of agitation in the state. Meanwhile, the farmers' boycott and protests against the ruling party leaders swept across from the north to west, and consequently, the epicentre of the agitation shifted from the northeastern region to the central (Jind district) and western parts (Hisar district). Broadly, the protest-landscape of the farmers' movement in Haryana was defined by the action space (protest sites), the areas protesters belonged to, and the intensity of their participation.

There were multiple and overlapping factors that contributed in shaping the protest-landscape of the farmers' movement in Haryana. The areas where farmers initially responded to the AIKSCC call "*Dilli Chalo*" had recently experienced farmers' protests on various issues and had gained some political awareness about the new farm laws. The BKU (Charuni) group had carried out a sustained campaign against the ill-effects of the new farm laws and various protests on the local issues of farmers in the northeastern districts of the state. Similarly led by the AIKS and some other farm unions, the farmers of northwest and west Haryana also had the recent experience of protests

for compensation of damaged crops and the idea about the adverse impacts of the new farm laws. The discontent among the peasantry against the JJP leadership for joining the BJP government in the state and supporting the farm laws of the central government led to the intensification of the farm agitation in the central and western parts of the state. However, the Jai Kisan movement for the procurement of crops did not much help the diffusion of the agitation in south Haryana due to the overarching political influence of the BJP in Ahirwal region.

The north–south gap in the distribution of protest sites and participation of farmers in the movement is explained by the difference in the level of agricultural productivity, cropping pattern, and agricultural marketing system. The cropping pattern of north Haryana has the dominance of paddy and wheat, with a much higher agricultural productivity than the mixed crop areas of south Haryana except Palwal district. Furthermore, having a greater surplus quantity of tradable agricultural commodities and beneficiaries of paddy and wheat procurement on MSP, the thought of dismantling the APMC *mandis* and procurement system was more scary and risky for the farmers of north Haryana than the fellow farmers in the south.

Two social factors – the support of *khaps* and participation of women farmers in the agitation – played a crucial role in shaping the protest-landscape of the farmers’ agitation in Haryana. The *khap* panchayats in the state having a good following in the peasantry (Jats) initially showed no concern with the new farm laws. Due to the bitter experience of their participation in the Jat reservation agitation in 2016, the leadership of these social forums was initially sceptical about the farmers’ agitation. But as the farmers from the *khap* areas were voluntarily drawn to border *dharnas* and toll plaza sites in large numbers, the *khap* leadership openly and unconditionally supported the SKM-led movement. This boosted the participation of farmers in the *khap*-dominated areas in east-central, central, and western parts of the state. The biggest takeaway of the farmers’ movement, the sizeable participation of women farmers, played a pivotal role in propping up the agitation in the central and western parts of Haryana. The women missing at the protest sites of northeastern districts of the state may be attributed to their low labour share in agriculture compared to other parts of Haryana. Another take away of the farmers’ movement was the generation of enormous social capital. The cooperation and mutual support systems developed among the farmers of Haryana, between the farmers of Punjab and Haryana, and among the farmers, workers, agricultural labourers, middlemen, and the civil society in general signified the three forms of social capital formation –bonding, bridging, and linking.

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Debanjan Roy

7 Acquiescence and assertion

The Kisan Andolan and a changing socio-political landscape in Uttar Pradesh

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The chapter responds to the attendant socio-political developments that occurred in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) caused by the year-long farmer agitation (2020–2021). We use the lens of the *Bhartiya Kisan Union* (BKU) in western UP to show how the agitation adopted a distinct political lexicon of protest against the ruling dispensation in the state. Overtures to the Muslims were a part of a reconciliatory strategy that used a language of *bhychara* (brotherhood) to revive older fraternal ties that were eroded after the riots of 2013. It rivalled the BJP's own outreach towards Hindu castes which also used *bhychara* as a tool to mobilise vigilante outfits in the defence of Hindu solidarity. The chapter shows how rival notions of solidarity had a role in influencing the socio-political landscape in the state, especially since opposition parties affirmatively used the trope of fraternity or solidarity to enter the electoral field.

In examining the relationship between the protests and the socio-political landscape, the chapter firstly puts to test the self-avowed claim of the BKU of having remained apolitical since inception. Such a claim is juxtaposed with the BKU's very confrontational stand against the BJP during the year-long agitation. This is an important problem that the chapter will cover, especially since the BKU prefers to be seen as politically neutral and invested more in what it views as *kisan ke muddey* (issues of the peasants). While the claim to remain apolitical may appear sound in the way the union positions itself as a guardian of agrarian interest, the farmer agitation has shown that the socio-political landscape in UP bore a strong signature of the BKU's influence.

The chapter will show how rival notions of *bhychara* and reconciliation that emerged out of the farmer agitation were tested in the elections in the state. Reversals faced by the BJP in western UP correspond to the consolidated vote polled by the Muslims in favour of the opposition alliance (*gathbandhan*). This aspect of the election has not received necessary attention, especially since the push back against the BJP is conveniently attributed to the BKU and the suggested reconciliation between the Jats and Muslims. Voting trends among Hindu castes, especially the Jats, who are aligned to the BKU reveal a significant increase in votes in favour of the BJP. This allows us to revisit the claim of reconciliation in light of the electoral choices that were made by the Muslims and the Jats.

The chapter grounds its key arguments within a rich oeuvre of scholarship that has documented the trajectory of popular peasant movement that followed the Green Revolution in the 1970s and thereafter. The chapter also takes into account personnel interviews with BKU cadre, *khap* elders, and representatives of the rival BKU outfits. It delves into local media coverage of the farmer agitation to trace the changing socio-political perceptions in the state of UP during the agitation. This is useful towards locating the relationship between a surge in vigilante activity and the portentous push-back by the BKU in western UP. Interviews and documents were sourced from the “Archive against Humanity” located at the Afkar Foundation, Shamli, and offer a rich resource for understanding the working of punitive laws and vigilante groups in western UP since 2013.

Section I briefly discusses the nature of *khap* politics and its relationship with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) and the BKU. It shows how by 2013 the BJP was able to exploit fissures in inter-*khap* relations and diminish the influence of the RLD and the BKU as the political and “apolitical” guardians of agrarian classes. Section II shows how the farmer agitation (2020–2021) offered the BKU an opportunity to push back against the BJP’s dominant position in the region by also adopting a strategy of reconciliation with the Muslims. It set off speculations about possible caste alliances being forged in the run up to the elections of 2021 by rival political factions. Section III shows how the BJP responded to the BKU’s role in giving shape to a pre-poll Jat Muslim alliance by vitiating the anti-Muslim rhetoric via *mahapanchayats* that rivalled similar gatherings conducted by the BKU and opposition parties to appeal to the trope of “*bhychara*”.

The chapter concludes with looking at the voting patterns in western UP in the elections of 2022, to suggest that the BJP’s losses in eight crucial constituencies obfuscate the rising vote share of the BJP from among the backward, Dalit, and dominant caste groups. The slender margins of victory of the *mahagatbandhan* candidates were a result of the historic consolidation of the Muslim vote that supported the *mahagatbandhan*. The chapter argues that the possibility of such a consolidation of votes by the Muslims in other poll-bound states set off a new wave of attacks to disenfranchise and punitively fragment the Muslim vote. The policy of arbitrarily using bulldozers in UP, Ram Navami attacks on mosques, and the proposed hijab ban in Karnataka have marked the period following the UP election as a well-tested strategy to interfere with a plausible pan-Indian consolidation of the Muslim electorate.

Section I

Peasant unions and bhychara

Until his death in 1987, Charan Singh was a leading Jat voice from west UP, architect of the Zamindari Abolition Bill in the 1940s, ex-prime minister, and an important face of the post-independence popular peasant movements. His demise was followed by the increasing popularity of Mahendra

Singh Tikait, the head of the Baliyan *khap* and also key architect of the BKU. Hasan (1989), Lerche (2013), and Omvedt (1981) argued that the BKU's position to speak entirely on behalf of agrarian economic interests has helped disguise the caste-based assertion of Jats and other dominant castes in the agrarian north. Jaffrelot (2003) and Brass (2011), at various points, showed how Charan Singh and Jat leaders like Sir Chotu Ram were instrumental in identifying the Jats within a broader category of the peasantry to dent the popular push-back in the 1930s and onwards against privileged rights over land (Dhanagare, 1987).

By the 1940s, Charan Singh posited a town versus country debate, as a way of presenting a backward and neglected nature of agrarian India as opposed to the more well-endowed town and cities (Brass, 2011). By the 1970s, the caste-effacing nature of the popular peasant movement found a veneer in the romantic portrayal of the "soldier peasant" in the rallying cry "*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*" (long live the soldier and peasant) (Sharma, 2021). It portrayed the peasantry as espousing a zeal to both contribute to food security and be ever prepared to respond to the call to defend the nation. It evoked a political sensitivity where successive ruling dispensations looked to placate peasant unions through populist measures that allowed the dominant caste groups who constituted the leadership and cadre of the popular peasant movement to retain their assertions in agrarian spaces.

The strategy adopted by unions to protect their agrarian interests through subsidies and loan waivers has been inaccurately read by recent scholarly approaches (Mehta & Sinha, 2022) as being a conscious attempt by unions to remain apolitical. Such an attempt to unpack union politics does not consider the longer history of political entanglements between the propertied castes/*khaps* and the state that can be located as far back as the colonial period. In the 1880s, the empire's growing interest to create an exportable surplus in grain and livestock was largely dependent on offering formal and informal political representations to members of peasant associations (Deo, 2021). Dominant caste bodies found political representation in newly emergent legislative councils in the 1890s, which in turn guaranteed them revenue remissions and extra judicial control over rent-paying tenants. The government portrayed such caste bodies as being the truest repository of ancient yeoman values that safeguarded the interests of the primordial "village community". Colonial commentaries on these "*bhychara*" castes created a neat distinction between castes denoted as propertied and those classified as performing labour or occupational work. Such a distinction went against the prevailing traditions of subsistence in variegated ecologies where occupational caste groups were invested in land- and livestock-related economies that spawned the north and the deccan region. Colonial classifications were directed towards creating labour pliancy and also to limit the discretion of occupational caste groups over the livestock economy. This brief detour into the colonial period shows how ideas of *bhychara* and dominant caste

solidarity are embedded in practices of the state in determining policies of land redistribution and political representation.

Post-colonial peasant movements of the 1970s and onwards relied greatly on the colonial evocation of “yeoman tiller” to make a case for preserving extrajudicial assertions of land in the name of protecting *bhychara*. *Bhychara* also determined the gains that Jats and other dominant castes accrued to preserve their political assertion and agrarian interests. Intra-*khap* and inter-caste *khap* solidarity responded to the call to Ahir, Jat, Gujjar, and Rajput (AJGAR) alliances. This was a term used by Charan Singh to portray a shared interest among dominant “yeoman” caste interests in the agrarian north. Hasan (1989) showed how Charan Singh was the architect of the BKD–BLD–Lok Dal alliance of peasant bodies that yielded major electoral gains for the party in the UP assembly despite the nationwide sentiment in favour of the congress in the aftermath of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination.

Mahendra Singh Tikait rose to prominence as a peasant leader in the late 1980s soon after the death of Charan Singh and emerged as the key architect of the BKU. The union retained an apolitical stance and claimed to work for the betterment of the agrarian community. Charan Singh’s political legacy was inherited by his son Ajit Singh, who, like the BKU, relied heavily on Jat *khaps* to claim to protect agrarian interests. The RDL founded by Ajit Singh and the BKU both traced their legitimacy to the popular peasant movements of the 1970s and, therefore, relied on the *khaps* to reinforce their respective roles as guardians of agrarian interests. Even though the BKU and RDL maintained an understanding over their respective roles in safeguarding agrarian interests, underlying tensions emerged that had a bearing on their relationship with the internal working of the *khaps*.

The BKU under Mahendra Tikait attempted to shed its Jat-based imagery and broaden its social base by appointing office bearers from among other dominant caste groups. From the 1990s, the BKU has appointed Rajputs, Brahmans, and Muslims to important posts at the national, state, and district levels to portray an image of social cohesion (Javed Tomar, personal communication, August 8, 2022). Rajesh Singh Chauhan, a Thakur, from Fatehpur was a three-time state president of the union, so was Rajpal Sharma, a Brahman face. Mahendra Singh Tikait’s long-time ally and Muslim face of the BKU, Ghulam Mohammad Jhola (a Rajput Muslim) offered a veneer of secularism by deploying the famous slogans *har har Mahadev* and *Allah hu Akbar*. Aside from the upper echelons of office bearers who were handpicked by the Tikaits, the BKU followed an informal and oral mode of communication with its statewide cadre and office bearers (Javed Tomar, personal communication, August 8, 2022). It opened the possibility for self-appointed leaders of the BKU to acquire local relevance as a preliminary step towards political mobility through local- and district-level elections. BKU cadre who have spent years in the union responded to the practice of

informal ties and oral consents by using the phrase “*na khata na bahi jo humney kaha wahi sahi*” (no account no books, what we say is what goes) (Javed Tomar, personal communication, August 8, 2022).

The autonomy exercised by BKU cadre in tahsils, towns, and districts suggests that the union leadership that passed over to Naresh and Rakesh Tikait after the demise of Mahendra Tikait in 2012 have little or no say on how individual leaders use the BKU to further their political ambition. Appointments to district-level posts were/are validated by a letter from the Tikaits and dependent on two factors – closeness to the Tikait brothers and the proven ability of the individual to bear the responsibility of resolving local issues such as government entitlements and unmet cane payments. The Tikaits are known to be willing to accommodate such ambitions as it gives the BKU a character that transcends its image from being a Jat-based union to one that represents the broader interests of the peasantry.

Saffron gatekeepers of the social body

The period after 2010 allowed the BJP to make inroads into *khap* structures and stake a claim on ideas of brotherhood that bound the *khaps* by a sense of fraternal cohesion. The BJP benefitted from the growing unease over the BKU and the RLD’s inability to safeguard agrarian interests of dominant agrarian castes in the face of an agrarian crisis. This is also one of the reasons for the growing disenchantment among the non-Muslim youths (dominant caste Jats, Rajputs, Tyagis, and Gujjars and OBC Sainis and Kashyaps) that began to move closer to the attendant currents of Hindutva by the late 2000s (Vinay Kumar, personal communication, August 2, 2022). The BJP’s outreach with the *khaps* deployed a political lexicon of hate that socialised various caste groups into the re-invocation of *bhychara*. Ramakumar (2017) argues that the BJP stokes the fears of Islamisation by highlighting the consolidation of the Muslim vote and victories of local Muslim leaders in prior assembly and parliamentary elections.

In the run up to the riots of 2013, the BJP found support from the BKU (Tikaits) Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangahtan headed by Harikishan Malik of the Ghatwala *khap* and erstwhile leaders of the BKU who broke away to start splintered groups (Rathour, 2022; Baba Sham Singh, personal communication, August 5, 2022). An incident on August 27 involving a case of personal enmity that led to the death of two Hindus and one Muslim man was given a communal colour. It led to a call for *beti bahu bachao* (save our daughters and daughters-in-law) which bore fruition in the *mahapanchayat* on September 5, 2013. Although the call was given under the broader umbrella of the BKU, the Ghatwala *khap* headed by Baba Harkishan Malik took the lead in organising the gathering. The presence of the *khap* headmen on the stage was dwarfed by BJP leaders Sanjeev Balyan and Sangeet Som who gave incendiary speeches to the large gathering of Jats. In the violence that followed, there was widespread killing and displacement of Muslims, from

villages in Shamli, where the Ghatwala *khap* is concentrated (Amar Ujala, 2019). These included the villages Lisarh, Bahvdi, Phugana, and Mohdpur Raising, and primarily targeted the Muslim occupational caste who worked as daily wage earners on Jat-dominant caste fields (Baba Sham Singh, personal communication, August 5, 2022). Areas inhabited by the Balyan *khaps* in Muzaffarnagar were left largely unscathed, except for Sanjeev Balyan's ancestral stronghold Kutba and Kutbi. Here the entire Muslim population totalling 200 households was displaced. The approximate number of riot-affected people in Shamli, Muzaffarnagar, who await redressal and rehabilitation stands at over 50,000 persons (Raju, 2021). A majority of these displaced camps dot the margins of overcrowded Muslim majority towns such as Kairana and Kandhla (Deo, 2021).

What followed after the riots and up to the farmer agitation of 2020 was a coeval relationship between the Jat *khaps* and other dominant caste groups who constituted important caste allies and foot soldiers of Hindutva in west UP. The riots evoked interest from among dominant caste youth to curry positions either with the formal vigilante outfits like the Bajrang Dal and Hindu Yuva Vahini or with new organisations that claimed allegiance to the cause of Hindutva (Deo & Choudhary, 2022). The preferential shifts by caste Hindu youth in pursuing avenues of political mobility outside of the union politics weakened the loosely defined structures of command practiced within the BKU.

An example of how the BKU was unable to wrest back its downward slide can be measured against its declining popularity among the *khaps* and an overall unease that has crept in towards its alleged inability to safeguard agrarian interests. In early 2019, thousands of farmers descended on the Shamli Sugar Mill premises demanding unmet dues. West UP represents a cane-dominant region where cane procurement is regulated under the sugar cane control order of 1966 and determined by the union cabinet under the fair and remunerative price (FRP). Unmet dues (Bhatnagar, 2019) amounting to hundreds of crores have caused small and marginal farmers from across dominant agrarian caste groups to sell their lands or secure motley gains from the slowly emerging real estate markets in west UP. After a little over a week of the protests, the administration stepped in to quell the rising discontentment that portended to spread to the other mills in west UP. In a meeting that followed with the mill management, district administration, and committee of farmers who were overseeing the protests, a decision to call off the protest was taken. The farmers were assured of timely payments within 14 days of the protest being called off.

Older members of the BKU who are now opposed to the Tikait-led union claimed that the protest dissipated after the local BKU leadership worked in cahoots with the local administration to help reach an agreement with the protesting farmers (Javed Tomar, personal communication, August 8, 2022). Although the farmers were promised that their dues would be cleared in two weeks, the mill and the administration remained non-committal once the deadline had passed (The Business Standard, 2022). The upswell of popular

anger had been nipped as a result of what many believed were vested interests within district-level BKU cadre. The aspiration of political mobility within the BJP is said to outweigh or overwhelm their role as peasant leaders, which can only be resolved by surrendering broader interests to the whims of the ruling dispensation.

Section II

From acquiescence to assertion

Tikait joined the farmer agitation rather tentatively, after initially supporting the three farm laws (Ghosh, 2021). His decision to break ranks with the BJP and join the movement must be seen as a response to the losing relevance of the union faced by relentless work by the BJP to diminish the union's stature in the previous years. Tikait appeared at the Ghazipur protest site, with a modest pose of supporters a little after the farmer unions of Punjab laid siege at Tikri and Singhu. As a member of the *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM), Tikait emerged as a popular face on national media, taking on the BJP in an irreverent style that highlighted the complicit role of the market-friendly BJP in exacerbating the agrarian crisis in rural India. His presence on mainstream debates lent the farmer agitation that was initially anchored in Punjab a broader regional and demographic coalition. However, in Jat-dominated tracts of west UP, the BKU adopted a strategy contradistinct from Tikait's role as member of the SKM. Unlike the SKM's wider social base due to the numerous unions that represented the interests of small, medium, and landless farmers, the BKU still relied on a traditional social base of rich farmers.

By joining the SKM, the BKU gave itself an opportunity to leverage on the SKM's increasing popularity to expand its appeal beyond the Jat Balyan *khap* in west UP. An opportunity presented itself in the days following the Republic Day farmer's march, when unidentified persons scaled the red fort, while several tractors bearing the SKM flag stormed Delhi. It evoked strong responses from the government and media, which reaffirmed that the farmers were primarily pro-Khalistan. Similarly, BJP proxies such as the breakaway factions of the BKU – Tomar, Ekta, Lokshakti, and Bhanu – all handed in memorandums to the agricultural minister stating their opposition to the farmer agitation (Rathour, 2022). On January 28 (2021), a large body of paramilitary was deployed to vacate the Ghazipur protest site and arrest Tikait. While deliberations between Tikait and officials of the UP government were under way,¹ the Loni MLA Nand Kishor Gurjar arrived with over 100 supporters and allegedly pelted stones on the stage. Images of the confrontation were beamed on social media platforms and news channels. It showed a teary-eyed Tikait appealing to his farmer brethren to stand up against the brutal regime. He threatened to go on a fast and refused to leave the stage until his peasant brothers brought him water from his village Sisauli in Muzaffarnagar. Tikait's moment of resistance turned the tide for the BKU

as almost immediately, thousands of tractors in the Jat-dominated areas of Haryana and west UP equipped with weeks of rations left for Ghazipur (Singh, 2022).

The same night that Tikait made his emotional appeal, Naresh Tikait (hereditary head of the Balyan *Khap*) made a call from the precincts of Sisauli, the ancestral village of the Tikaits (PTI, 2021), for a *mahapanchayat* to be held the following day at Muzaffarnagar inter college grounds. The meeting was attended by RLD's Jayant Chaudhary, SP MLA Nahid Hasan (from Kairana), and numerous Jat leaders cutting across *khap* loyalties. Most significant was the presence of Ghulam Mohd Jhola, long-time friend of Mahendra Tikait and the Muslim face of the BKU, who had stayed away from the BKU after the riots of 2013 (Outlook India, 2021). The BKU leadership at the Muzaffarnagar *mahapanchayat* attacked the ruling dispensation for creating divisiveness in society. Naresh reached out to the Muslims with a promise of reconciliation, asking them to forgive the incidents of 2013 and start afresh. Here too, the BJP was held responsible for sowing the seeds of discontentment and for exploiting *bhychara* for their electoral gains. In response to a call for reconciliation, Jola gave out an older slogan "*Allah hu Akbar and Har Har Mahadev*" coined by him during the heyday of the BKU under Mahendra Singh Tikait.

In the days that followed, numerous BKU *mahapanchayats* drew immense support in Jat-dominated belts of west UP and Haryana. The Ghazipur protest site began to resemble the camps at Tikri and Singhu due to the large contingent of tractors that were now camped there. The renewed alliance between the BKU and the Muslims set off the political grapevine in the state. A Jat-Muslim alliance threatened to sink the BJP's prospects in west UP and affect the overall numbers of the incumbent dispensation in the forthcoming assembly elections stated to be held in early 2022. The SP, which was otherwise absent from the political landscape since 2017, sensed an opportunity to build on the momentum offered by the farmer agitation. Moreover, the resignations by backward caste leaders like Om Prakash Rajbhar in 2019 offered the possibility for a broader coalition of castes to test the hold of Hindutva over the backward and upper castes (Scroll Staff, 2019).

Hate factory and the kisan andolan

A testing ground for suggested alliances was the upcoming local elections in UP, initially stated to be held in January 2021. However, faced with mounting resistance by the SKM in Delhi and by BKU *mahapanchayats* across west UP, the government delayed the polls until May 3 (Deo, 2021). The local elections in UP were conducted alongside the state assembly elections in Bengal, Assam, and Tamil Nadu. The results for the four states going to polls were to be announced on May 2. In UP, the BKU maintained a muted response to speculations that the union would endorse the fruition of a RLD and SP alliance. Jayant Chaudhary actively reached out to *khaps* within the

Jat caste to seek blessings from caste elders to carry forward his father's and grandfather's political legacy to safeguard agrarian interests. The BKU was, however, non-committal on endorsing either the SP or RLD and insisted that it would remain apolitical and press on with its demand to push back the farm laws.

The second COVID-19 wave made landfall by the first week of April 2021, just as the state was warming up to the election frenzy (Deo & Choudhary, 2021). Despite court warnings to reconsider the local elections, the government organised polling in hundreds of poorly managed booths that turned the election into a massive super spreader. The UP government failed to give the population a dignified healthcare system as bodies lined up outside crematoriums and burial grounds or were abandoned on the banks of the river Ganges. In the results declared on May 2, the BJP lost the bulk of its seats at the panchayat, block, and zilla council level (Shukla, 2021). Despite these reversals, the party was able to wrest back control of the zilla chairman seats as non-BJP council members either succumbed to the lure of money or were intimidated into voting for BJP proxies (Dainik Bhaskar, 2021). The results of the elections in west UP were ominous as the SP and RLD failed to leverage on the Jat-Muslim consolidation that had acquired wide currency in the months prior to the local elections.

As the second COVID-19 wave abated by May–June 2021, the BJP built on its electoral gains in the local elections by upping the Hindutva ante. There was no let-up in acts of vigilante violence between the local elections in UP and the state elections in March 2022. The use of punitive laws that commenced with the infamous police encounters in 2017 shaped a broader punitive legal framework in the state. This involved the use of draconian provisions of the Indian Penal Code and National Security Act to persecute Muslims (Deo & Choudhary, 2022). Since 2017, the police have relied on a network of *mukhbhars*/informers who are associated with organisations such as the Hindu Jagran Manch and Hindu Yuva Vahini and provide tip-offs that lead to arrests (Hindustan Times, 2018). Such an ecosystem adds teeth to anti-cattle slaughter and smuggling laws that were reintroduced under Adityanath and tethered to the National Security Act (The Wire, 2020). Interfaith marriages under the new anti-conversion law, also known infamously as the “love jihad law”, have led to the arbitrary arrest of numerous Muslim men across the state (Neogi, 2022). Newly married interfaith couples who attempt to register their wedding under the Special Marriage Act were/are faced with the wrath of vigilante groups who have kidnaped women and pressured the family to charge the husband with forced conversion (Mishra, 2021).

The vigilante ecosystem is ably served by the excessive consumption of social media and local stringers who use platforms like the *Public app*, YouTube, *Instagram*, and WhatsApp to validate acts of vigilante violence and the arbitrary use of police force. It helps explain the popular sentiments that have endorsed the criminalisation of the Muslim community and the aggressive response to the suggested outreach by the BKU towards the Muslims.

BKU *mahapanchayats* were rivalled by similar gatherings, which invoked the symbolism of *bhychara* to forewarn an Islamic state threat to Hindu daughters and called for the protection of the mythical Hindu village community (*chhattis biradari*) (Deo & Choudhary, 2022).

Section III

Solidarity for who?

In September 2021, a large *mahapanchayat* was held in Muzaffarnagar under the SKM banner. The gathering issued an open threat to dent the BJP's electoral prospects in 2022, lest it reconsidered the farm laws. It marked a rare moment during the ongoing farmer agitation when RLD's Jayant Chaudhary, Ghulam Mohd Jhola, and Rakesh Tikait shared the stage along with other leaders of the SKM. Jhola went to the extent of saying that the Muslims were in full support of the SKM and will abide by its decisions to ensure the electoral defeat of the BJP (Bhattacharya, 2021). Jhola's hope of a concerted fight against the BJP in the upcoming election, however, rested on whether Rakesh Tikait was willing to steer the BKU in such a direction.

In the days following the *mahapanchayat* held in Muzaffarnagar, the ruling regime acted with even greater impunity as it sought to protect Ashish Mishra, son of the Minister of State for Home, who on October 8 allegedly mowed down protesting farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri. The state government dragged its feet until an unrelenting SKM pressured the administration to file an FIR and arrest Ashish Mishra. The deaths of the farmers fuelled widespread protests as the SKM demanded the immediate arrest of those involved and for the resignation of the father to allow a fair and independent probe. Although Ashish Mishra was arrested, demands to sack his father and Ajay Beni continue to be stonewalled.

By November, with polls being a few months away, the central government showed no signs to reconsider the farm laws. In UP, the chief minister Adityanath kicked off the election season by reinforcing his government's reputation of safeguarding Hindu interests. The excuse of an official government program was made to visit Kairana, a Muslim majority town in West UP (Raju, 2021). The town has been a testing ground for Yogi's encounter policy, the use of punitive laws, and the vast number of vigilante outfits that have caused the deaths and injury of numerous cattle dealers. The official visit ensured that the local administration pulled out all stops to ensure the attendance of Anganwadi workers, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers, and government schoolteachers. Aside from the stops announced by the government, Adityanath used the opportunity to challenge the BKU-led Jat-Muslim *mahapanchayats*.

The CM was joined on stage by leaders of the Gurjar, Rajput, Jat, Saini, and Kashyap castes and members of vigilante outfits to present a united face of Hindutva-led caste alliances. The CM brought up the myth of Hindu exodus that was first used in 2016 by the late MP of Kairana, Hukum Singh.

He assured the local community that his administration had acted tough on “communal elements” and “organised crime” and would continue to ensure that UP remains crime free (Bhatt, 2021). To press home his intention to keep gangsters at bay, he also inaugurated the construction of a Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) campus in Kairana (Raju, 2021). In the past, the PAC has been notorious in being used to target the Muslims as seen in the Hashimpura Massacre in Meerut in 1987 (Manazir, 2021). The large crowds present at the “official meeting” were beamed across news channels to suggest a groundswell of support for the incumbent CM.

Less than a month after Adityanath’s visit to Kairana, the central government announced the repeal of the three farm laws (The Hindu, 2021). The SKM convened a meeting and agreed to continue the protests until the government took the farmers’ unions into confidence to develop a road map towards setting MSP on grain procurement. However, with the political season warming up in UP and with the farm laws abolished, Tikait was expected to have a significant impact on the socio-political outcomes in the state.

On December 11, 2021, Tikait held a *mahapanchayat* in Kairana a few hours after vacating the Ghazipur protest site in Delhi. The symbolism of his *ghar wapasi* (homecoming) in Kairana was projected in the media as a response to Adityanath who had only recently visited the town and raked up the myth of the Hindu exodus (Deo & Choudhary, 2022). The meeting in Kairana was mainly attended by local Muslims, who offered a grand welcome to Tikait. He returned the affection by giving a detailed review of the farmers’ agitation and learnings from the Punjab unions (Deo et al., 2021). He however refrained from commenting on where he stood with regard to the upcoming elections. Instead, he reminded the incumbent government that votes in the upcoming election would be polled for better infrastructure, jobs, and electricity rather than issues such as *ghar wapasi*. Not only did the speech signal a return of the BKU’s self-avowed claim of maintaining a distance from formal politics, but it was also a subtle admission that Tikait/BKU could do little to influence the Jat votes outside of their immediate strongholds in west UP.

As if to take a cue from Tikait’s speech at the Kairana *mahapanchayat*, the BJP under Adityanath introduced numerous stops a month before the model of conduct was to come into effect. A 50% slash in electricity rates, subsidies for tube wells used in irrigation, and free rations were magnified to portray a welfarist government working in the spirit of *sabka saath, sabka vikas* (welfare for all) (Shah, 2022). Adityanath pitted himself against a *mahagatbandhan* of what he called a coalition of narrow interests as opposed to his non-partisan welfarism that reportedly touched all sections. While giving himself full marks in governance, he again warned those engaging in crime and who were reportedly seeking refuge in the *mahagatbandhan* that once the results were out, the bulldozers would be out to clean up whatever was left of the criminal ecosystem (Deccan Herald, 2022).

In March 2021, the BJP entered the election fray by assuaging its core caste voter base of OBCs and dominant caste through ticket distributions and alliances with caste-based parties (Prabhat Khabar Digital Desk, 2021). In the

highly polarised areas of west UP, it rewarded incumbents such as the 2013 riot accused Sangeet Som. In Loni, the Hindu vigilante and incumbent MLA Nand Kishor Gurjar was given a ticket to contest a second term.² In the elections that followed, the SP-led coalition made significant gains by increasing its tally by double the number of seats it had secured in 2017. In west UP, it emerged victorious in Muslim majority seats. These include Pankaj Malik in Chartawal; Nahid Hasan in Kairana; Umar Khan Behet and Shahid Manzoor in Kithore; Atul Pradhan in Sirdhana; and Rafiq Ansari in Meerut city. The BJP's reversal in west UP has been attributed to the affirmative role of the farmer agitation, which caused a push-back against communal forces due to the reconciliation between the Jats and Muslims (Kumar, 2021; Sawhney, 2022).

Attempts to project the results as a mandate against hate obscure the complex nature of farmer politics and its entanglement with caste assertion. RLD's attempt to portray itself as an all-inclusive party invested in creating a climate of reconciliation with the Muslims did not reflect in its pattern of ticket distribution. Rather, it tried desperately to appease sentiments of the Jats and other dominant caste groups in the region. Ex-MP and BJP MLA Avtar Singh Bhadana, a popular Gujjar leader, switched sides from the BJP to the RLD a few weeks prior to the election (Indian Express, 2022). He lent new meaning to the term AJGAR alliance coined by Charan Singh in the 1970s, by stating that the elections would see the emergence of a (M)AJGAR coalition with the support of the Muslims. The RLD made a show of solidarity with the Muslims by allocating tickets to the community in five Muslim majority constituencies (Bulandshahr, Thanabhanwan, Baghpat, Sivalkhas, and Syana). This was out of a total of 33 tickets that were predominantly given to members of the Jat caste, or to Dalits where seats were reserved by constitutional mandate (One India, 2022).

Voting patterns

The Muslim voting pattern revealed an unprecedented consolidation of votes as a direct response to mobilisation of Hindu castes on the grounds of Hindu solidarity. The strategy of reconciliation remained an important poll strategy that offered the RLD an opportunity to regain its waning influence in west UP. The voting patterns, however, revealed a major surprise. Of the nine seats that the RLD won, it was unable to hold on to its Jat base and had to rely on the Muslim vote to see it through. In Sardhana, the incumbent BJP MLA and riot accused Sangeet Som lost by a margin of 18,200 (Vinay Kumar, personal communication, August 2, 2022). Yet, his vote share increased from 97,921 in 2017 to 100,373 in 2022, helped by a major shift in votes of the BSP that declined from 57,239 in 2017 to 18,140 in 2022. The winning candidate Atul Pradhan was helped by the 85,000 registered Muslim votes, 22,000 registered Jat votes, and minor breakaways from the other caste groups.

In Shamli, an assembly segment that is notorious for high crime rates, vigilantism, and police atrocities, a similar pattern of Hindu vote consolidation

occurred. Here, the RLD candidate and Jat leader Prasan Choudhary got fewer Jat votes as compared to the BJP's Tejender Nirwal, who found support from the Ghatwala *Khap mukhiya* (hereditary caste head) Rajinder Malik. Nirwal also found endorsements from Gujjar *mukhiyas* and BJP leaders such as Virender Gujjar. The consolidation of the OBC vote in favour of the BJP corresponded to a major shift in the BSP's vote share, which saw a decline in votes from 17,115 in 2017 to 8,183 in 2022. This shift did not benefit the newly created Azad Samaj Party (ASP) but moved to the BJP and helped its overall vote count swell by 25,878 votes compared to 2017. The gatbandhan candidate Chaudhary sealed his victory because votes counted in Muslim majority Kandhla lent him a winning margin of 7,107 votes.³

Finally, in Baghpat, which for many years has been a safe seat for the RLD, a Muslim candidate Ahmad Hameed was fielded to portray a reconciliatory approach that was first set off by the Jat–Muslim alliance during the farmer agitation. In 2017, Hameed had contested on a BSP ticket and secured 61,206 votes and lost by 31,360 votes to BJP's Yogesh Dhama. In 2022, both the BKU and RLD cadre in Baghpat stood opposed to the RLD's choice of Hameed's candidature. Local BKU cadre like Pratap Singh Gujjar and *khap* choudharys of the Jat caste endorsed Dhama (Devender Dhama, personal communication, August 10, 2022). The trajectory of the BSP vote followed a similar trend as the one witnessed in Shamli. Its vote shifted significantly to the BJP as the party's vote share dropped from 61,206 votes in 2017 to 12,863 in 2022 (Election Commission, 2022). Bolstered by the Dalit vote, the BJP increased its tally from 92,566 votes in 2017 to 101,420 votes in 2022. Dhama's winning margin was a mere 8,845 votes due to the consolidation of the 75,000 registered Muslim voters who rallied behind the RLD candidate Hameed.

The shifting trend within the BSP's Dalit vote reveals a decline in the BSP's appeal among aspirational Dalit youth. Praveen Gautam, a young activist and leader of the ASP, attributes such developments to the increasing awareness among local Dalit outfits that mirror the aspirations of other Hindu castes in exploring political mobility through vigilante work. Gautam's assessment shows us how the BJP has established the idea of Hindu *bhychara* within Hindu castes, often at the cost of intercaste feuds and tensions. It is this trope that offers us an insight into how the coming months will once again position counter-ideas of solidarity that will be tested in the national elections of 2024.

To conclude

The farmer agitation had a definitive impact on the socio-political landscape of UP, especially in the way it offered the Muslim community an opportunity to locate itself alongside the Jats to affect an electoral push-back against the constant onslaught on its freedoms and identity. In the chapter, the authors have tried to show that the promise of reconciliation that was central to the BKU's ability to regain lost ground in west UP was more a strategy to revive

the union's declining relevance as a guardian of agrarian interests and vehicle of political mobility. The promise of reconciliation while offering a lexicon of resistance to the incumbent regime also obscures structural complexities of dominant castes that have vacillated between the BKU and RLD and are now firmly aligned to the BJP.

The counter consolidation of the Muslim vote in the elections was, therefore, unprecedented and evoked a punitive response from the BJP. Soon after the results were announced, the BJP adopted a nationwide strategy to thwart similar consolidation in BJP-ruled and poll-bound states. The hijab ban controversy in Karnataka and attacks on mosques during Ram Navami celebrations across India occurred soon after the elections. However, it was in UP that a new model of intimidation was adopted as municipal laws were used to primarily target activists in UP. Bulldozers were deployed to demolish the homes of alleged antisocial elements who were charged under the recently amended Gangster Act. The Act now gives excessive powers to the police to confiscate property and arbitrarily detain the accused for over 60 days at a time (Malviya, 2022). The selective use of draconian laws and provisions of the Indian Penal Code has been encouraged by a vigilante network that has remained resolute in the face of the farmer agitation. UP offers an important reading of how saffron-ruled states can suitably use the umbrage of law and order to resist popular protest while also normalising the political aspirations that drive membership towards vigilante outfits.

Interviews

Interview with Devender Dhama. Human Rights Defender, Baghpat. August 10, 2022.

Interview with Javed Tomar, General Secretary. BKU (Arajnaitik). Shamli. August 8, 2022.

Interview with Praveen Gautam, Mandal Adhyaksh of Azad Samaj Party, Saharanpur. August 4, 2022.

Interview with Vinay Kumar, Former District President, Bhartiya Kisan Union, Saharanpur. August 2, 2022.

Baba Sham Singh. Thambedar, Ghatwala *Khap*. Lisar, Shamli. August 5, 2022.

Notes

- 1 Due to heavy police barricading, the Ghazipur protest site was under the jurisdiction of the UP government.
- 2 Nand Kishor Gurjar emerged victorious with a margin of 8676 as compared to 42,813 votes in 2017.
- 3 Of the 95,000 Muslim voters registered in Shamli district, the approximate number of registered Muslim voters in Kandhla is upward of 25,000 votes.

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Debanjan Roy

8 Making of farmers' resistance in northern Rajasthan

A study of Shahjahanpur border protest

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Introduction

During the farmers' encirclement of Delhi from November 2020 to December 2021, three sites, Tikri, Singhu, and Ghazipur borders, received the most attention. The daily protests, protesters, and the modes of mobilisation for these sites were widely covered in popular media. However, one site where farmers had continued their agitation along with the other three borders but received scant attention was the Shahjahanpur border. This border connects Haryana and Rajasthan and is around 80 km from the Delhi border. The farmers had put up their tents on the NH 8 that connects Delhi and Jaipur. While in Tikri the farmers had occupied more than 10 km of the highway, here the farmers had occupied only around a 1-km stretch on a flyover. Unlike the other three sites, Shahjahanpur wasn't crowded. The number of protesters gathered here continued to show a similar determination amidst all kinds of climatic and political hardships. The number of farmers who were present there was not more than 1,000 at any point in time, but usually 400–500 farmers or other participants were sitting in the tents on the highway for almost a year. These protesters were primarily from the northern Rajasthan districts of Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh.

This chapter is an attempt to understand the nature of mobilisation during the 2020–2021 anti-farm law struggle in the aforementioned two districts of northern Rajasthan. The findings discussed here are based on field visits to the Shahjahanpur border and discussions with some farmers in the two districts. The Shahjahanpur field visits were conducted during the sit-in. During the protests, we randomly spoke to the protesting farmers. However, our conversations with the farmers in Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh are in the format of long, structured interviews. Ten farmers were interviewed from Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts. Narratives of the leaders and participants are used here to explain how various agricultural issues were highlighted in these two districts.

The chapter highlights the dynamics of farm unions and their functioning at the micro level. It also discusses some of the inherent contestations that shaped the farmers' collective resistance at the Shahjahanpur site. How did

the mobilisation among the farmers at the grassroots take place for Delhi encirclement when the other districts of Rajasthan were silent? The study also discusses if there is a state-specific nature of mobilisation around issues of agriculture or if such issues transcend territorial boundaries. How far did cultural affinities play a role as these two districts are also influenced by the neighbouring Punjabi culture? How farmers in the two districts looked at these protests is also captured in this chapter. Unlike the three other sites that were popularly shown as full of political and cultural life, Shahjahanpur was a normal political site with all features of a contested farmer politics in India in normal times. It was a site with a mixed bag of farmer unity and division, and tension between agitated, tech-savvy youth and traditional Marxist-communist political ideologues. These were some of the features that would not fit in the popular categories like agrarian populism or other traditional theories of farmer mobilisation. The communist party unions including the Students Federation of India, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) dominated the Shahjahanpur site. A few members of railway unions were also present there. In addition, a section of farm leaders who were involved in electoral politics since quite some time also marked their presence.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the theoretical debates, followed by a section on the historical factors behind the nature of mobilisation. The third section discusses the contestations that were evident during the mobilisation. The fourth section deals with the tensions between organised left-leaning organisations and unorganised youth groups.

Inadequate theories

The traditional theories of political mobilisation focused on three major factors: deprivation, identity, and organisation. Ted Gurr (2016), in his popular analysis of mass political mobilisation, argued that a relative sense of loss in one group vis-à-vis the other leads to mass mobilisation. On the other hand, Charles Tilly (1977) argued that an organisational capacity converts this sense of deprivation into mobilisation. Theda Skocpol's (1979) comparative study of three revolutions also focused on organisations playing a major role in transforming unrest into political resistance. Political parties as organised force was a central element in these theories of social movements. In their recent work, Della Porta and Diani (2005) focused on the rise of identity as a major factor in the 1980s. By the end of the Cold War, the world had witnessed ethnic identities being reshaped and leading to the emergence of newer state boundaries or movements.

However, in the Indian case, the debate on farmer mobilisation was largely centred around two questions: the agenda and the target. The question of agenda further focused on the question of caste or class. It was the latter that was reflected in the mode of production debate, whereby capitalist mode of production was considered to be a major determinant of farmers' plight and hence a

reason for mobilisation (Patnaik, 1989; Thorner, 1976). Caste question, on the other hand, emphasised upon the sociological character of the agrarian question belonging to the landed upper castes. In 1984 in his famous article, Oommen (1984) focused on the dilemma of understanding Indian peasantry's political mobilisation and social reality by highlighting the ongoing debate around the mode of production or the class differentiation among the peasantry.

The dual conceptual categories of caste and class faced a major challenge from the emergence of the “new farmers’ movements”. Amidst the ongoing debate among Marxist scholars about capitalist mode of production, a new farmer identity was being framed in India that was qualitatively different. This identity formation was seen as a major factor behind the rise of what was referred to as the “new farmers’ movements” (Brass, 1995) in India. It was Dipankar Gupta's (1999) work on western UP that highlighted the emerging forms of identity in western UP. Even Gail Omvedt (1995) highlighted some of the issues related to the reformulation of identities in Maharashtra's peasant society.

By the late 1990s, expansion of information and communication technology emerged into the rise of “networked forms of mobilisation”. Such mobilisations were unorganised, random, and also short-lived, and yet they were able to mobilise a large number of people. Religious majoritarian identity formation had already taken a new shape with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerging as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha. Although social scientists in India were trying to understand the emerging forms of political behaviour, social networking through technology was considered to be a Western phenomenon that could transform the political landscape of societies of the West Asia. The academic obsession of the dilemma of caste versus class has not left the social scientists of India. Although the BJP in its electoral campaigns emphasised that it has transformed this categorisation by bringing in a new national identity in India's political discourse, social scientists continued to believe that it may not be a long-term phenomenon. The counter mobilisation to this assertion was assumed to emerge through the Jantar-Mantar protests or alternative management of election strategies.

When the farmers in late November (2020) were stopped from entering Delhi and had put their pandals/tents on the national highways connecting the capital city with different states, no one in the academic circles had hoped that this would last long. Nobody even knew how this had happened. The three sites that gained a lot of attention, Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur, were seen as one more example of random mobilisation. However, it not only lasted for more than a year, but it finally forced the government to withdraw the three contentious laws.

It became possible due to a unique combination of three elements: identity, organisation, and technology (Suthar & Kumar, 2022). However, mobilisation of farmers for protests at different sites was also a manifestation of different kinds of combinations of the three factors. Negotiations among various farmer groups for identity, or organisational question wasn't taking place in a unilinear fashion with any prior consent. Instead, these questions were continuously

being negotiated and renegotiated. A major example of the ongoing process of unity formation along with contestations and negotiations could be seen in the case of mobilisation at the Shahjahanpur border. Singh (2022) in his recent article has discussed the organisational aspects of different sites during farmer protests. Sidana and Kaur (2022) in a recent study also highlighted the role of various religious acts in farmer mobilisation in Punjab. Kumar (2022) highlighted how the farmer protests need to be seen within the larger context of structural socio-economic change that has gripped rural India.

Methodologically, to understand the nature of farmer mobilisation that is taking place, it is necessary to understand the everyday functioning of farmer unions while moving away from the structural questions of the caste and class duo. Macro-level factors leading to massive mobilisation are not a very regular phenomenon of farmer mobilisation. It is the everydayness of negotiation, contestation, or pressure techniques that works between the local administration and farmer unions that keeps the politics on. It needs to be highlighted that the movements in western UP during the 1980s culminated into the national-level agitation after the display of force at the district level. Macro-level factors like caste and class are not so major determinants of the nature of mobilisation as these two factors are always negotiable realities. They do become critical determinants, but it is only after they reach a certain stage of negotiations they start becoming structural features. Caste and class as structural features are very less likely to operate on their own. They need congenial supportive policy, politics, and economic environment. Theories of farmer mobilisation need to focus on this everydayness of interaction, contestation, and negotiations among the state agencies, family members, or unions.

Despite the fact that the farmer unions could put up a great show of unity at the borders of Delhi, local level conflicts continued to impact the alliance. Although emergence of a “hybrid agenda” (Suthar & Kumar, 2022) fostered a new kind of identity formation, the prevailing tensions among various farmer organisations remained almost intact. It may not be visible so clearly where only one kind of organisation with a distinct agenda was dominant. But in case of regions, such as northern districts of Rajasthan where different organisations had a quite distinct support base, the prevailing tensions between these diverse groups did get reflected in the mobilisation for encirclement of Delhi. The challenge in theorisation of such cases lies in bringing in such local-level everyday-centric variables. Any effective generalisation of the farmers' movements in India cannot be explained merely by analysing either macro-level policy changes or only after protests emerging as major events. The political undercurrents need to be unpacked by bringing in everyday forms of negotiations at multiple levels.

Mobilisation in northern Rajasthan

A majority of farmers who continued to sit on the Shahjahanpur border were from (but not confined to) the two districts of Rajasthan: Sri Ganganagar and

Hanumangarh. The two districts are agriculturally most prosperous districts in the state. Sri Ganganagar district has few tehsils (blocks), which are well-irrigated areas due to the availability of canal water, called Gang Canal, flowing from Punjab. Other parts of the districts are also irrigated by the Indira Gandhi Canal water system and Bhakra irrigation system. Almost 99% of the irrigated area is due to canal irrigation in the two districts. Few parts of Hanumangarh district are also irrigated as the Ghaggar River flows through these areas.

Expansion of facilities for irrigation, coverage of the Agricultural Producers Marketing Committees, and increasing usage of chemicals and fertilizers since the beginning of the Green Revolution in 1960s facilitated widescale socio-economic change in these districts. Both the districts are also adjacent to Punjab and Haryana. The increasing modernisation of agriculture in these states also had a great deal of influence on agricultural development in Rajasthan.

However, the nature of modernisation in the two districts is quite different. Sri Ganganagar has been far ahead in modernisation due to the availability of canal water before Hanumangarh. Besides, it has also been an industrial town due to state investments. Hanumangarh was carved out of Sri Ganganagar as a district only in 1994 and remained marginalised prior to that.

Sri Ganganagar district has a substantial Sikh population. According to the 2011 census, around 24% of the population was Sikh, whereas 73% of the population was Hindu (Census of India, Sri Ganganagar, 2011a). The majority of the people in the district speak Punjabi. In Hanumangarh district, on the other hand, the Sikh and Muslim population are almost the same. The Sikh population is around 9%, whereas the Muslims are around 7% of the district population (Census of India, Hanumangarh, 2011b). Both the districts have a substantial proportion of scheduled caste population. Hanumangarh district has 27.85% of SC population, whereas Sri Ganganagar district has 36.6%. In case of Sri Ganganagar, a large number of big farmers are either Sikhs or Jats. In case of Hanumangarh, a majority of large farmers are Jats. The majority of SC population in both the districts are involved in agricultural labour.

This profiling has a significant impact on the nature of mobilisation among the farmers. Farmer unions in Hanumangarh are largely dominated by Jats. It is the left party's farmer unions, especially the AIKS, that is a major force in Hanumangarh. In case of Sri Ganganagar, on the other hand, the Sikh farmers have been able to form different independent farmer organisations along with the AIKS. The AIKS has a significant proportion of Jat and Sikh representatives, and the same can also be said about other organisations. However, the area of influence of both the groups is significantly different. Non-AIKS unions are quite active in Karanpur and Padampur blocks of Sri Ganganagar. The AIKS, on the other hand, is quite influential in Anupgarh, Gharsana, and Rawla blocks. In Hanumangarh, non-AIKS farmer unions are influential in Sangaria, Pilibangan, and Rawatsar blocks.

The mobilisation for the Shahjahanpur border took place in both the districts by all the organisations. The farmer unions decided to put up a separate

resistance at the border of Rajasthan at Tikri, where farmers from nearby areas of Punjab and Haryana had gathered. The sit-in continued here as in other sites. More than 1000 farmers continued to be there throughout the period. Farmers from other parts of Rajasthan, especially from Sikar, Jhunjhunu, etc., also joined in. Farmer unions of Rewari district of Haryana also joined the protest there. The Jat Mahasabha leaders of northern Rajasthan, especially Rajaram Meel, also supported the protest.

Unity question

There was a sense of support from various quarters, and site was not the place of unity only for farmers coming from the districts of Rajasthan. There was a free supply of tea from farmers from the Mewat region of Haryana throughout the day. They also offered varieties of snacks free of cost. The farmers also offered the protesters sweets, especially laddus made of dry fruits that the villagers had prepared themselves.

There were railway worker union representatives who had come in support of the farmers. They said that the economy of the two districts is closely interlinked with farming, farmers, and production. If these three are fine, everything will be fine, else every household gets impacted. They said if farmers are protesting, we need to support them because our lives are closely related to theirs.

Pawan Duggal,¹ a main person in mobilisation from the two districts for the AIKS, demonstrated how different sections from all walks of life supported this movement. While showing us various tools meant for, for example, cooking, he said that all these utensils and other things were provided by the merchant class back home. The merchants (also known as *aartiya*s or commission agents) said that they can't come in open support or else they will become target, and yet they would support the cause in all possible ways. He said that the movement never had any shortage of things required due to this support. Besides, he also said that farmers from the nearby farms also supported them. The nearby villages supplied milk, buttermilk, ghee, etc. The farmers also permitted them to take vegetables from their farms.

We also met some farmers at the protest site whose farms were next to the highway. They expressed their solidarity with the protesting farmers. However, they also expressed a sense of fear from the government and its agents in their villages. Hence, they were not part of any active political mobilisation.

Pawan Duggal also explained how their previous experience with private mandis and corporate farming has been a disaster. He explained that few years ago the farmers of Sri Ganganagar had signed a contract with Pepsi company for the production of a variety of barley. The company provided them seeds and also assured them purchase of their product. Farmers grew only that variety of barley instead of other crops thinking it will give them benefit. However, when the crops attained full maturity, the company refused to purchase the product saying farmers didn't abide by the contract and used

different varieties of seeds. When farmers resisted against this, the company filed an FIR against some farmers, alleging violation of the contract. He said that the farmers were clueless about any of this. When the police asked them to compromise with the company, they realised that they were caught up in a difficult situation. Some farmers were even arrested by the police. The farmer unions helped these farmers by hiring lawyers and fighting it legally, and somehow the case was resolved.

Narrating this, he said one could imagine the plight of the farmers if such companies would start controlling the entire supply chain. Leave aside small and marginal farmers, even big farmers were not capable of fighting the corporates. Once this becomes the law, who would rescue such farmers?

He also explained how mandis (APMC spaces) have become much more safe, secure, and accessible spaces for farmers over the last few decades. Due to constant struggles of farmers, unions, and political mobilisation, governments have spent money on making mandis modernised spaces that are well-lit and safe, with proper warehousing facilities. Farmers have now started reaping proper benefits of the mandis. Before it could reach the small farmers, the government decided to do away with the mandis. He emphasised that the mandi system demands reforms but not privatisation or doing away with the state support.

Agricultural development of the northern part of Rajasthan is contingent upon the canal water supply from Punjab. Punjab and Rajasthan have always been at loggerheads concerning the regularity and quantity of canal water supply. This dispute also gets manifested into grassroots level mobilisation of Sikh and non-Sikh farmers. Non-Sikh farmers' organisations are involved in demanding more and more water supply from the Punjab government and pressurising the Rajasthan government to resolve it. The Sikh farmers, on the other hand, highlight how the government officials in Rajasthan are negligent of the farmers' problems.

The two forms of parallel mobilisations happen peacefully in their respective areas of influence without getting into any public conflict. However, the larger question is: what brought these farmers together that culminated into mobilisation for the protests at the Delhi border?

Their association with the Indian National Congress (INC) has also minimised any possibility of clash, but there are not many occasions where these groups unite. This time when farmers of Punjab started their resistance against the farm laws, farmers from the two districts also joined the resistance in large numbers. Demand for MSP was one major factor. Besides, there was a sense of fear that the new laws would harm every farmer; hence, they put up a united struggle.

Aspirational and agitated youth

Initially, the organisations had shown a great deal of momentum. The farmer agitation reached the Delhi borders when farmers' unions in north Indian

states gave a call for “*Dilli Chalo*”. Various farmer groups from these two districts have been quite assertive in the past few decades regarding demands of the farmers.

Once the local body elections for panchayats got over and results were declared, on December 13, 2020, farmers from Sri Ganganagar and Haryana reached Delhi on tractors and trolleys. When farmers were crossing Hanumangarh, left-associated farmer unions joined them for Delhi. The left-leaning unions were also joined by farmers from Sikar and Jaipur districts of the state. These unions should have reached Delhi through the Tikri border since it is the NH 6 that connects Delhi with northern Rajasthan. However, keeping in mind the mobilisation possibilities within Rajasthan and support from farmers from Jaipur, these unions decided to come through a route that would connect farmers from various parts of Rajasthan. On December 13 when these unions reached Shahjahanpur, there were more than 10,000 farmers at the site.

Many other political leaders from the *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM) like Yogendra Yadav joined them at the Shahjahanpur border. Shahjahanpur is the border of Rewari district of Haryana and Alwar district of Rajasthan. To avoid any clash with the police, the SKM reached an understanding that wherever the police will stop them and prevent them from further movement, they will put their tents at that site. In this case, Haryana police prevented these farmers from going any close to the Delhi–Haryana border. Going by the SKM decision, the AIKS-led farmers decided to put up their camps at that site.

However, non-AIKS farmer groups, which were largely led by young farmers from Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh, disagreed. They argued that they should sit near Delhi to draw attention and sitting 100 km away from Delhi will hardly give them any visibility. The protesters at the other sites had also done the same. However, by the time these farmers reached Delhi, the SKM had already been settled and started managing the sites. SKM leaders insisted to stay there only.

A major factor that distinguishes the protest at the Shahjahanpur border from that at other sites is the difference over the place of sit-in eruption of a rift between the approach of youth versus the organised groups of the Communist Party unions. Although all these groups started from their respective places together displaying a great sense of unity, when they reached the border both displayed their disagreements with each other. The youth-led group of farmers belonging to the Gramin Kisan Majdoor Samiti (GKS) group that had largely come from Sri Ganganagar district wanted to sit-in at the Delhi–Haryana border, as was the case at other sites. The other unions, especially the AIKS, didn't accept this position. They reiterated the position of the SKM that had decided that they will sit on the highways wherever the police would stop them (The Hindu, 2020).

The youth group refused to accept this position and broke police barricades. The police tried to stop them by using water cannons and tear gas.

A majority group decided to stage the sit-in at Shahjahanpur, whereas the other group went ahead with their plans. Finally, this group staged their sit-in near the Rewari border. However, gradually a lot of farmers from the split group came back and joined their fellow farmers at Shahjahanpur. When we spoke to the participants at the Shahjahanpur border, they said that it was an unorganised group of youth who didn't believe in organised protest and hence went ahead with their own plans. Some of them also said that the SKM leaders here at the Shahjahanpur border requested them to stay, and they decided to be with them. However, the SKM continued to be with both the groups.

This rift did impact the momentum of resistance. A majority of farmers who were sitting at Shahjahanpur were from Hanumangarh district led by the AIKS. A large number of Jat farmers from Sri Ganganagar also joined these farmers led by Rajaram Meel. A large number of farmers from the nearby districts of Bhiwani, Rewari, Bhiwadi, etc., also joined the protesters here. The other group kept on marching at the Rewari–Delhi border. The group alleged the leadership for calling them antisocial elements. They also said they initially felt demoralised as the leadership refused to speak to them. However, the SKM and other leaders denied such charges (Punia, 2021).

Farmers at both sites continued to get support from their respective villages, and supplies were ensured for them. However, the Shahjahanpur border site involved many farmers coming from diverse parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Haryana. A majority of these farmers were linked to the AIKS. But the local Jat leadership also supported the protesters here.

History as a factor

It is the history of agrarian change of the region that needs to be factored in while understanding farmer political mobilisation. It is a pertinent question to ask; in case of Rajasthan, the eastern districts are also quite well irrigated and agriculturally fertile, yet the kind of political churning among the farmers that had taken place in these two northern districts has not happened in case of other districts. Why so? The answer to this question is quite closely related to the nature of agrarian change and socio-economic change the region has witnessed in the past six decades. The presence of a sizeable proportion of Jats is a major factor behind this.

Rajasthan has a sizeable population of Jats. There are three major districts in which the Jat population is spread: the northern districts of Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh; the central districts of Sikar, Nagaur, Churu, and Jhunjhunu; and the eastern district of Bharatpur. The former Bikaner Province was largely dominated by the Jat population. Although there are no official statistics available about the Jat population, the 1931 census of the Bikaner Province shows that more than 1 million people, that is around 30% of the total population of the province, belonged to the Jat community.²

The Jats consider themselves to be a proud agrarian population. After independence when land reforms were implemented, a large number of Jat families who were involved in cultivation but didn't have land titles were given land ownership. This was also an outcome of rising social and political consciousness among Jats as a political constituency. Exposure to modernity among Jats was not only an outcome of economic prosperity but also few leaders played a major role in such consciousness (Sir Chotu Ram, e.g.). Richard Sassin (1940) also argued in his work how even after independence political mobilisation among Jat peasantry was a major political phenomenon.

With the entry of Green Revolution, the former cultivator population of the state also became a rich land-owning caste by the 1970s. The Communist parties played a major role in mobilising the Jat population in its initial phase, especially in its fight for land redistribution and resistance against the caste hierarchies. The AIKS, CPI, CPI(M), and CITU were the major players in this region.

In 2006, farmer unions in Gharsana led a major protest against the Rajasthan government's decision to increase electricity tariffs and reduce canal water supply for the Gharsana block of Sri Ganganagar district. At least six farmers were killed in police firing during the protests. If one travels to the district office spaces, one would find some protest or other happening by farmers every third or fourth month. The AIKS has been a very influential mobilisational force since then. It has a strong organisational base in almost all the blocks of these two districts. A major support base of the AIKS is the Hindu Jat population. Other backward caste groups are also supporters of the AIKS, but among the farmers the Jats are the biggest support groups. Even during the farmers' movement, the AIKS could mobilise a lot of Jat farmers and leaders who came in support of the farmers' protests. During our field visit to Shahjahanpur, we could see some banners, flags, and posters of Jat leaders who had come in support of the farmers. These leaders, especially Rajaram Meel who had been a contestant from both the BJP and Congress, came in support of the farmers. To understand the diverse kinds of mobilisation that took place in these two districts, it is necessary to understand the history of these communities.

This mobilisation continues even to date and plays a major role in farmers' negotiation with the state with regard to various benefits for the agriculture sector. The other major population in the districts of Sri Ganganagar is the Sikhs. In the blocks of Sri Ganganagar, Karanpur and Padampur, there is a sizeable Sikh population who are big landowners. This farmer group has not been associated with any traditional Communist Party unions but has its own kinds of political mobilisation. The Sikhs have been affiliated with the Indian National Congress (INC) for electoral purposes, but the farmers have formed their own associations, that is organisations. The Sikhs in this region are quite wealthy due to heavy investment in agricultural modernisation.

It is this history of the two districts that places them in a unique position in terms of farmer mobilisation and unionism. With the three farm laws, farmer

unions of the region realised that the withdrawal of the state from the agriculture sector may harm their fortune adversely. Besides, the law related to contract farming was also seen as a tool to take away lands from the farmers.

The two districts have been witnessing farmer resistance since the last three decades. The AIKS organised massive protests against policies of the state and central governments. However, there are many more farmer organisations now in these two districts that claim to be representatives of farmers' interests, and they too have some support among farmers in different blocks of the districts.

The GKS, on the other hand, is also a very influential farmer organisation in various blocks of the two districts. It has been continuously involved in raising everyday issues of farmers. It continues to be a major force against any kind of injustice against farmers and keeps on resisting the assaults by the police or bureaucracy in the nearby areas. In many respects, the GKS has challenged the traditional hegemony of AIKS-led farmer mobilisation in the region. The GKS also gets lots of support from other organisations in the nearby areas of Punjab and alleges Rajasthan government bureaucracy for ignoring the demands of farmers.

The mobilisation duo: identity and technology

The twin strategy of mobilisation that made the movement effective was a unique mix of farmer identity and usage of technology, especially WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube. WhatsApp was used for everyday forms of mobilisation within the villages. Different unions or individual leaders made WhatsApp groups of people who could be probable help during the mobilisation. Although most participants were farmers, people from other walks of life were also part of the campaign. It included commission agents, teachers, local medical practitioners, etc. YouTube was used to update the villagers about what was happening at the borders. Daily videos of people from their villages were uploaded and communicated to the people back home. The usage of Twitter was not so frequent among the local leaders, but those who were at the Delhi borders for a long time used it extensively. Any local help was acknowledged over Twitter.³

All these mechanisms were used to motivate people to join the campaign. It was also a sign to make people feel that their leaders or those who claimed themselves to be leaders were accountable to their constituency back home. This was one of the reasons that even when some leaders of the SKM were willing to compromise, they couldn't do so as there was no possibility of any back-channel negotiations.

Another major channel used for creating a sense of belonging among various farmer groups across the two districts of Rajasthan was Facebook. Although Facebook is not a popular medium in general, it is a significant platform for farmers to connect with their peers and relatives. It helped different groups reach out to their friends during the mobilisation. However,

Facebook wasn't used for everyday mobilisation or coordination, realising that state power may not allow them to mobilise at a mass scale. Facebook, YouTube, and other social media platforms were used only to spread the news about what was happening in the public domain.

Perhaps this was for the first time in the history of the farmers' movement in India that different forms of technology were used at such a vast scale. This usage of technology proved quite helpful in bypassing various state agencies and also the agents of the ruling party that were quite involved in spreading the counter-propaganda to delegitimise the movement.

However, the technology usage wasn't really based on the production of a secular, digitised citizenry or the political identity of farmers. Creation, propagation, and assertion of Sikh identity were at the core of this mobilisation, although this wasn't the only form of identity that was being created. Gurudwaras played a significant role in providing a space for deliberation among community members. The social networking platforms were further used to reach out to a larger group of farmers, including the non-Sikhs. Although it wasn't only the Sikh identity that was being propagated, it did play a major role in mobilising Sikhs across states. The usage of religious identity and its symbols is not new for farmers' movements. It has been used quite extensively by farmer organisations in western UP (Gupta, 1999; Ramakumar, 2016). However, in this case, the Sikh identity was one of the propellants in this movement that took different identities also along. It didn't create an exclusionary religious identity as happened in other such cases. One of the respondents who were there at the Shahjahanpur border throughout said:

In Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh everybody respects Sikh farmers for their hard work and attachment with land. When they came on streets, other farmers did realize that there is something wrong happening. It also resulted into creating a different kind of bond of unity amongst Sikhs and non-Sikhs especially other farming communities.

It is also interesting to note that the AIKS-led mobilisation was more about speeches, pamphlet distribution, and educating people about the likely negative impacts of the three farm laws. Other organisations were, on the other hand, engaged in social media-based mobilisation. The youth members of these organisations were proactively involved in spreading news of everyday developments. The youth mentioned how they were busy making videos of participants viral through Facebook and Twitter.

Conclusion

Most of the existing studies on farmer protests look at the "everydayness" of protest sites, ways of protests, or mobilisation. Some studies have looked at the changing nature of rural and agrarian societies in the respective regions as a push factor for farmer resistance. This study made an effort to

show how the dynamics of farm unions and their mobilisational strategies were greatly determined by the prevailing micro-level dynamics between these unions. These dynamics did not always lead to unity or consensus in favour of resistance as becomes clear in the case of the Shahjahanpur site. This study has argued in favour of two significant determinants for a more nuanced understanding of farmer politics: functioning of various farm unions and relevance of the history of agrarian change and unionism in these regions. The farmers' movement since 2014 also needs to be understood in this context. The farmers' movements were not sudden, random agitations that erupted in response to the three laws. The laws provided the last spark needed for massive mobilisation, but the farmer unions have been quite active in these regions since the past few decades. So far, they were articulating their concerns and demands at the local level. It was for the first time that they got a chance to show their strength at the national level, and none of the unions wanted to miss this opportunity. This can be said about farmers from the northern district of Rajasthan whom this study covered.

Notes

- 1 He was interviewed at the Shahjahanpur border on January 14, 2021.
- 2 This information is available on the website www.jatland.com/home/Jat_Belt (Accessed on January 5, 2023).
- 3 These details are based on a conversation with Harvinder Singh, who was an active participant at the Shahjahanpur border. Interviewed on November 13, 2022.

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Debanjan Roy

9 Farmers' protests in Rajasthan

Continuing a historic legacy

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Introduction

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the centre, ever since it assumed power in 2014, has focused on the act on the farm sector, particularly crop husbandry, by exposing the sector to the market for efficient allocation of resources. It is argued that the intervention of the state in fixing the minimum support price (MSP), monopoly procurement, and input subsidies breeds inefficiency in the crop production sector (Gulati, 2020). The massive size of the labour force engaged in the agriculture and allied sectors assumes special significance as about half of the total workforce in India ekes out the hand-to-mouth existence from the sector as wage labour or cultivator or a combination of both. From the perspective of the farm-dependent workforce, there has been a substantial deterioration in the conditions of farmers since the early 1990s. The trade liberalisation corroborated further by frequent ups and downs in the global economy, especially since the introduction of neoliberal economic policies in the early 1990s, has exposed the farm-dependent population in India to the vagaries of the international market. The Committee on Doubling Farmers' Income (DFI) has suggested measures to resolve the crisis in agriculture in India. The DFI Committee recommended doubling farmers' income by 2022 without altering the structure of asset holding (production), exchange, and distribution. On the contrary, the DFI Committee suggested strengthening trade liberalisation by reinvigorating the state interventions in the market for better price realisation through international trade (Committee on Doubling Farmers' Income, 2017). Farmers are expected to receive higher income for their produce from the international market by tapping into the advantages of the scale economy in agricultural production and marketing through Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs). In other words, the role of the government is limited to the facilitation of international trade. The economic philosophy of the DFI Committee is traceable to the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in agriculture.

Following the neoliberal policies and deregulation of the market, three farm bills were passed in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha on September 17 and 20, 2020, respectively. The Farm Bills 2020, aimed at overhauling the

existing marketing system of agricultural commodities and Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) established in selected districts in every state (barring a few exceptions like Kerala). These farm laws were (i) Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020; (ii) Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bills, 2020; and (iii) Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020.

Farmers in India, particularly in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and western Uttar Pradesh (UP) were organised against Farm Bills 2020. Farmers were mobilised in states and regions where APMCs were functioning effectively. Protests against Farm Bills 2020 in Punjab and Delhi were started in September 2020 (Moneycontrol News, 2020; Ghazali, 2020). Before Farm Bills 2020 were passed, they were brought out as ordinances by the central government on June 5, 2020. In response to the ordinances, farmers started protesting but were confined mostly to the local level. When farmers' plea for the repeal of the Farm Bills fell on deaf ears, they started mobilising in large numbers and organised protest marches from Punjab and other parts of India to ensure that their voices reached the government in New Delhi. They demanded the withdrawal of Farm Bills 2020. Thousands of farmers with tractor trolleys marched to New Delhi, but they were stopped at the borders in New Delhi by the Delhi police. The approach of the central government towards farmers left them in sheer agony. Farmers from Punjab, Haryana, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan rounded off New Delhi from all its border entry points. After the Delhi police blocked the entrance to New Delhi, farmers started the agitation at different borders to New Delhi from November 26, 2020. Joint Farmers' Committee (*Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM)) was formed to coordinate the acts of various farmers' organisations to protest against the Bills. Eventually borders at Singhu (Haryana–Delhi), Kundali (Haryana–Delhi), Tikri (Haryana–Delhi), Ghazipur (UP–Delhi), Shahjahanpur–Kheda (Rajasthan–Haryana), Palwal, Mewat, Dhansa, Gurgaon, and Chilla (UP–Delhi) became major sites of farmers' agitation. Besides, there were mobilisations and sit-in *dharna* at different places in different states, at toll booths, tehsils, and district headquarters, to protest against the Farm Bills. At toll booths, vehicles were allowed to ply without paying tolls for almost a year. The farmers blocked the Adani–Ambani–Ramdev's business concerns by sitting in front of their business outlets to protest that the purpose of Farm Bills was intended to help the capital parked in the agro-processing sector. They also announced the boycott of the products of Ambani (Reliance's Jio SIM) and Ramdev (Patanjali Products).

On this line, a large group of farmers from Rajasthan was also proceeding towards New Delhi through NH 48 following the "*Dilli Chalo*" call by the Farmers' Union. The spot for the struggle was not a natural selection for the prolonged and intensive struggle of farmers but rather a forced sit-in as the government in Haryana state unleashed brutal attacks on farmers on their

protest march to New Delhi (India Today, 2020). The Joint Farmers' Committee instructed farmers to start a *Morcha* at the place of blockade (Shahjahanpur–Kheda border) and not indulge in any form of violence with the Haryana police. The initial attempts by a fraction of farmers from Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh districts of Rajasthan to proceed further to New Delhi against the *Morcha* Committee's call failed, and these groups also then returned to the site of agitation where the movement is housed for the struggle. The farmers' struggle persisted for more than a year at the Shahjahanpur–Kheda *Morcha*, after it was formed at the Rajasthan–Haryana border (NH 48) on December 13, 2020, and became one of the prominent *Morchas* and accommodated thousands of farmers from all other states who could not proceed to the Delhi Border *Morcha* due to heavy police deployment on all possible routes by BJP-ruled states such as Madhya Pradesh, UP, and Haryana.

On the inclusion and involvement of political parties in the movement, there were serious debates and discussions. The convener of Gramin Kisan-Majdoor Samiti (GKS), Ranjeet Singh Raju, took the stand that political parties and organisations should be kept away from the farmers' movement. It further explains how the movement succeeded in mobilising local people; without the support of the locals, it would have been difficult for the movement to sustain itself for a year. The nefarious attempts of the anti-farmer movement spearheaded by the constituents of the BJP-led NDA government in New Delhi could be quelled during the entire period of the movement.

Against this backdrop, the agenda of bringing neoliberal economic policies and granting permission to the corporate houses to take the land, labour, and market for agricultural commodities in India was planned by the NDA government. This chapter analyses the process of mobilising the people from the state of Rajasthan for a common cause of farmers in India. The chapter is based primarily on the perception of farmers and their personal experience in the movement against Farm Bills 2020 elicited through personal interviews and their leaders who have actively participated in the course of the farm struggle for a year. The discussion in the chapter is organised into three sections. A brief discussion on the background that pushed the farmers to the forefront of the farm struggles is presented in Part 1. Part 2 narrates the day-to-day activities and life at the site of the struggle with the purpose of showing how the agitating farmers could mobilise the support of the public. The chapter is concluded in Part 3.

Part 1

Farm Bills 2020 were aimed at freeing farm production from the regulation and purview of the state and leaving the sector for the market forces. The BJP-led NDA government in India is of the view that the major stumbling block in transforming agriculture in India is the size of marginal and small farmers constituting about 86% of total cultivators in the country. The first Farm Bill 2020, viz., Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and

Facilitation) Bill 2020, was intended to get rid of the marginal and small farmers (petty producers – they always distort a competitive market) from the arena of production and marketing of agricultural commodities. On account of the fragile capital base and in a state of deprivation of other infrastructure facilities for adopting advanced technology, small patches of land at the disposal of small farmers could be passed over to corporations for agro-processing or large-scale capital-intensive farming practices, while petty producers in the farm sector could work as wage labour in their own fields but under the corporate. The farmers became free in the double sense of the terms. They do not own any means of production to engage themselves, and they are prepared to sell their labour for livelihood. So the capital under the neoliberal era demands centralisation of power and weakening of the federal structure, which would facilitate the capital to deal with fewer decision-making units, which the big capital demands. The state government controls and regulates the APMCs because agriculture is a state subject. As the new farm law comes into effect, agriculture ceases to be a state subject and falls under the purview of the central government because the incorporation of *trade and commerce* in the newly introduced Farms Acts 2020 transferred the control of agricultural production and marketing to the central government. The DFI Committee has recommended that the size of the farm-dependent population comprising cultivators and agricultural labours could be brought down to a maximum of 33% of the total workforce in India, which was about 45% when the DFI submitted the report in 2017 (Committee on Doubling Farmers' Income, 2017).

Small and marginal farmers still survive in the farm sector because there are hundreds of APMCs controlled and regulated by respective state governments. The APMCs are regulated by a committee comprising representatives of farmers, traders, and other stakeholders including nominees of the government. Farmers, irrespective of their type, could exercise equal rights in selling their produce in the APMCs at a competitive price. For monopoly procurement of agricultural commodities with MSP, the APMCs are the centre of agricultural trade. Farmers' bone of contention is that the APMCs would cease to exist if agricultural commodities are permitted to be traded outside the APMCs, and it would eventually drive the monopoly procurement and MSP into a quagmire. In other words, marginal and small farmers will fall into the vagaries of the market and will be forced to sell their products at buyers' price, which will be deprived of a minimum reserve price as it prevails now. Farmers do realise that monopoly procurement is restricted to a few crops, notwithstanding the fact that the government announces MSP for 24 crops including multiple specifications of the same crops in India every year. Nonetheless, the MSP fixes the reserve price around which marginal farmers could bargain in the market with traders.

Moreover, there are different layers of traders in every APMC, and they connect farmers in remote villages with APMCs under their jurisdiction. Traders make interest-free advances to farmers for the standing crops. There has been a solid and unwritten agreement between farmers and traders in

every APMC for generations. It has been a long-standing relationship among farmers, traders, and their agents working in villages. The long-standing relationship built on time-tested mutual trust helps farmers to access market information on time through trading agents. Such market information is vital for farmers to decide on the appropriate prices and time to sell their produce. The collapse of the APMCs would force farmers to depend on the informal credit market at an exorbitant rate of interest. It has been argued that total liberalisation of agricultural trade will foster growth and bring prosperity to farmers (Gulati & Roy, 2021, 2022). Farmers expressed their apprehension that the very purpose of the Farm Bills is to do away with the MSP and monopoly procurement. Precisely for this apprehension, farmers have demanded legislation on MSP and monopoly procurement.

There are as many as 80 million marginal and small farmers in India, and they are a formidable size of workforce for any country (NSS, 2021). The second Farm Bill, viz., Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill 2020, was meant to convert small and marginal farmers into wage labours by bringing corporate houses into contract farming. The history of contract farming has indicated that the agro-processing capital has never been fair to farmers. In the Farm Bills 2020, the conditions stipulated under the second Farm Bill 2020 were meant for contract farming, which works against the interest of farmers and from the capital in the agro-processing industry. The third Farm Bill 2020, titled as Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill 2020, has been framed in such a way that traders are given a free hand to manufacture an artificial crisis in the market for essential commodities including vegetables and pulses.

In the farm struggle, farmers in Rajasthan were actively involved from the very beginning. The structure of the agrarian population and diversity of crops grown in the state reveal that Rajasthan stands distinguished as the agricultural capital of India. Farming and dairying are the mainstays of livelihood of majority of the population in rural Rajasthan. The state has a protracted history of farm struggles and farmers' movements for centuries. The nature of farm struggle had changed from the pre-independence era to the post-independence era. In the pre-independence era, farmers' struggle in Mewar, Hadauti, and the Shekhawati region was prominent for their fight against the local ruler for their injustice in the form of hefty taxation from farmers. However, in the post-independence era, the farmers' protest in Rajasthan was confined to agriculturally prosperous northern districts of Rajasthan. In the later period, farmers' protests in the state have always been driven by the demand for electricity, water for irrigation, and compensation for the crop losses.

The movement in the state was spearheaded by a handful of organisations of farmers and rural workers, viz., All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), Rajasthan Kisan Sabha, *Bhartiya Kisan Union* (BKU), All India Agricultural Workers' Union (AIAWU), *Adivasi Adhikar Ekta Manch*, *Dalit Shoshan Mukti Morcha* (DSMM), *Gramin Kisan Mazdoor Samiti* (GKS), *Jai Kisan Andolan*, and *Mewat Kisan Panchayat*. Farmers' movement of 2020–2021 received the

much-needed support from a wide spectrum of organisations working for various interest groups such as political organisations, trade unions, *Khaps* of Haryana, employee unions, and cultural groups. Another important feature of the movement against Farm Bills 2020 was that it had accommodated and engaged farmers from different religious groups, and they actively took part in the Shahjahanpur–Kheda *Morcha*. It was for the first time in the history of India that the Delhi–Mumbai National Highway was virtually brought to a standstill for almost a year in 2021. In sharp contrast to the assurance given by the central government, the last union budget disappointed farmers as there had been a cut down in budgetary allocation for procurement of agricultural commodities at MSP, and furthermore, only two crops, viz., rice and wheat, were mentioned in the list of crops for procurement at MSP in the 2022–2023 budget. It shows that the fear and apprehensions of farmers have been proven right.

Part 2

The struggle against Farm Bills 2020 started in September 2020 at the local level before it was spearheaded at the national level in November 2020. After a year-long agitation, it was temporarily put on hold on the assurance from the government that issues raised by farmers would be considered favourably sooner rather than later. As mentioned elsewhere, several movements and people from different walks of life were involved in the farmers' movement at the Shahjahanpur–Kheda border, and the movement comprised different unions of farmers. An umbrella organisation called *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM) was formed to lead the struggle. The farmers' union involved in the movement shared different ideological planks. Yet, the Joint Farmers' Movement was democratically constituted for a common cause in the interest of farmers, even though they fell apart in many respects. Despite the contradictions, they formed a formidable force against the farm laws and for the common interests of farmers. The Dalit organisations, which work for wage labourers and have contradictions with farmers hailing from rural areas, unconditionally supported the farmers' movement. It was a notable characteristic feature of the SKM. There was no denial of the fact that the SKM had several internal contradictions, which could not be easily resolved through discussions and debates. In the leadership role, religious groups and caste organisations had posed insurmountable problems to be sorted out. After prolonged debates on what should be or ought to be the colour of the flag of the farmers' movement and the content of the propaganda banners (SKM), it was mutually agreed that each organisation could use their flags and banners in the movement.

A small landholder farmer, Mr Shopat Ram from Raisingh Nagar in Sri Ganganagar district of Rajasthan, reflects the voice of farmers at large:

We understand that the agitation is an inevitable and spontaneous outcome of the policy of the Central Government against the farm sector in India on the behest of big corporate houses. These farm laws are

state-sponsored attempts to forcefully take lands from farmers and legally hand them over to the big corporate houses in the agro-processing industry. The conspiracy against farmers forced us to leave our homes and stay in the open place, braving the scorching sun in the summer and chilling winter alike for almost a year. We are doing it to protect our only source of livelihood. We rejected Jio SIM, Jio Mart, and the toll plazas on the highways only to register our protest against Reliance on whose behalf the central government has unleashed an unscrupulous attack on the means of production of the farming community in India.

The SKM declared that the farmers' agitation would continue until the central government withdrew Farm Bills 2020 by the fag end of 2021 and also agreed to other demands of farmers. The important demands of farmers included (i) legislation on MSP and monopoly procurement of all major crops at MSP, (ii) repeal of Electricity Bill 2020, and (iii) withdrawal of the central law against stubble burning. After the *Mahapadav* (sitting-in-*dharna* for a long time) commenced its sit-in protest on November 26, 2020, Rajasthan *Morcha* commanded its struggle on December 13, 2020, at the Shahjahanpur–Kheda border¹ (NH 48). The *morcha* continued till December 10, 2021. Important eventful days such as December 13, 2020, and January 18, 25, and 26, 2021, witnessed maximum participation at the site of the struggle. However, the movement could be successfully led till the government was forced to come forward and accept the demands of farmers. During the protest, 720 farmers died at different sites of the farm struggle. The number of martyrs would have certainly increased but for restraint not to fall prey to the plot of BJP–RSS supporters. Besides this, the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic took a heavy toll. The BJP used the pandemic COVID-19 spread as a reason to dismantle the protests; however, this attempt was successfully countered by the central leadership of the movement.

The demand for MSP brought the farmers onto a single platform cutting across partisan politics. A farmer, Rajendra Yadav from Kotputli block in Jaipur district of Rajasthan came to the site of the struggle with a group of farmers. He said,

I cultivated tomato in three *bighas* of land last year and had a production of 100 quintals of tomato, which were sold for ₹1 lakh. A good harvest and a better price in the last year encouraged me to cultivate tomatoes this year as well. More fertiliser and better seeds resulted in higher production of 200 quintals of tomato. However, the price crashed and the 200 quintals of tomatoes this year fetched the same revenue as the 100 quintals last year. It dissuaded me from augmenting productivity and production. The price of crops needs to be pre-fixed and it calls for active state intervention.

In order to provoke and invoke violence, cabinet ministers and, on certain occasions, the prime minister himself indulged in false propaganda against

the farmers' movement by labelling the movement as a conspiracy against the nation and painted the agitating farmers as anti-nationals. Furthermore, they alleged that the farmers' movement had connections with terrorists and extreme religious fundamentalist forces only to destroy the country. The BJP government painted the farmers from villages as anti-nationals. The farmers stayed back with their family members, including the elderly, students, women, and children, at the site of the struggle. They slept in temporarily built tents and huts, while others went to sleep in tractor trolleys. In the extreme cold weather in the winter, farmers remained unquenchable. The central government was under the impression that the farmers would not be able to withstand the peak summer in Rajasthan as the elderly, women, and children were without adequate measures to protect themselves from the scorching sun. The cabinet ministers and the leadership of the right-wing political parties that were part of the government in New Delhi grossly underestimated the strength of the farming community at large. Farmers assembled in large numbers, braving the scorching sun during May–June 2021.

Figure² 9.1 explains the locales where Mahapanchayats were organised as part of the farmers' movement. The Mahapanchayats that took place as a spontaneous expression of solidarity could be found taking shape in as many

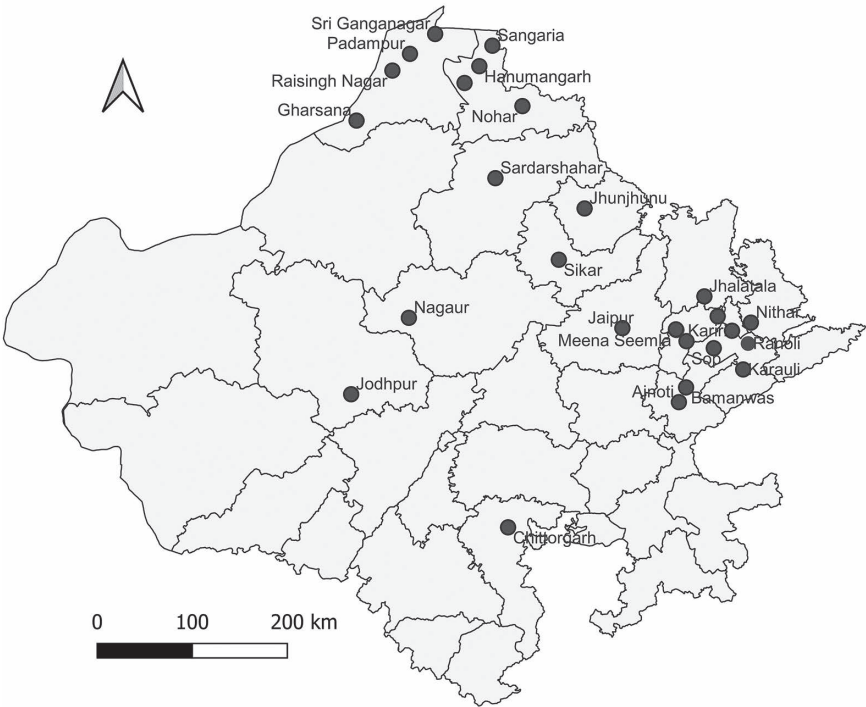


Figure 9.1 Locale of Farmers' Mahapanchayat against Farm Bills 2020 in Rajasthan.

as 221 locales in Rajasthan. A young woman farmer, Sheetal Kanwar from Bawdi tehsil in Jodhpur district said,

No one invited me to the farmers' movement. When I heard the news of protesting farmers against Farm Bills 2020, I decided to join the movement as a mark of solidarity to my fellow farmers. My whole family went to the Shahjahanpur–Kheda border and stayed there for two and a half months. We participated in the movement to strengthen the agitation by the farming community and intended only to force the BJP government at the centre to repeal the anti-farmer laws and also bring MSP under central legislation. In the farmers' movement, I realised that all the farmer brothers and sisters lived together in harmony and did not have any complaints or discrimination of any form there at the site of the farm struggle.

At the Shahjahanpur–Kheda border of NH 48 in Rajasthan, farmers from different parts of the state of Rajasthan formed the *Kisan Morcha*, along with farmers from Rewari, Mahendergarh, and Bhiwani (Haryana). It is worth mentioning here because the BJP state government in Haryana unleashed a brutal physical attack against farmers and farm workers. The farmers at the Haryana border supplied milk, buttermilk, ghee, and curd to the site of struggle for months together without a break even for a day. In the morning, farmers go around houses in the neighbourhood to collect milk and other milk products from fellow farmers for thousands of farmers sitting at the site of the struggle.

The role of *khaps* in the farm struggle against Farm Bills 2020 has already been well documented (Singh, 2022a). Farmers and labourers from a group of villages called *Bawal Chaurasi* (*khaps*) merit a special mention in the farmers' agitation. *Bawal Chaurasi* is located near the border area on the Haryana side. The farmers' movement in *Bawal Chaurasi* has remained weak in the last two decades. The BJP governments in Haryana and at the centre thought it would be easy for them to defeat the agitation as the villages are the stronghold of the BJP. For any struggle involving people from different states, local support is an inevitable factor for its success. To the surprise of everyone, farmers of the nearby villages including the local *khaps*, supported the farmers' movement. The local people participated in the agitation in different ways and through a range of platforms.

Local people from the adjacent areas to the villages of the Shahjahanpur–Kheda *Morcha* point allowed the farmers to use toilets in their houses and extended all facilities for a prolonged stay. On the contrary, liquor dealers, petrol pump dealers, and traders at NH 48 turned against the agitation because their business had touched its lowest ebb due to the road blockade. As the main entrance to New Delhi was blocked at the Shahjahanpur–Kheda road, petrol pumps located on the Haryana side on NH 48 were closed down.³ The long-distance trucks and heavy vehicles plying on the route used to buy oil from pumps in the Haryana border as the price of oil in Haryana was cheaper (around 10%) than in Rajasthan, and therefore, the blockade of NH 48 caused

substantial losses to the petrol pump dealers in the area. The local traders flexed their muscles against the farmers without any provocation. However, farmers and wage labourers in the villages stood with the movement by exposing the interest of the traders. Farmers, shopkeepers, and hotel owners in the locality extended support to the movement even though prolonged struggle and blockade on the road disrupted their source of livelihood in many ways. The agitation and *dharna* were very well organised with a disciplined rank and file.

***Joint kisan morcha* (SKM)? A miniature of the Indian Panorama**

At the Shahjahanpur–Kheda *Morcha*, substantial representations from several states were marked by the presence of various groups of farmers across regions, genders, religions, castes, and communities. Moreover, women farmers from different states and communities took part in large numbers in the struggle. Thousands of women farmers from Haryana, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Punjab reached the site of the farm struggle in response to the call by the SKM. Women farmers from Dalit and *Adivasi* communities hailing mostly from Assam, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Gujarat also joined the agitation and stayed at the site of the farm struggle for months together, leaving their families, crops, and animals behind. At several occasions, when the movement was in a crucial stage during the cold months of December and January, thousands of farmers hailing from Kerala and Maharashtra reached the Shahjahanpur–Kheda *Morcha* to take part in the movement. It is worth mentioning that around 2,000 tribal women farmers from Maharashtra took part in the farmers’ movement. Unfortunately, two tribal women lost their lives on their way back home due to extreme cold: one in Jaipur itself and the other just after reaching Maharashtra. They were among the first martyrs of the farmers’ struggle against the Farm Laws.

In Figure 9.2, different districts in which the farmers’ agitation as part of the movement took shape and spread further are presented.

Farmers also constructed a “Shaheed-Smarak” on the movement site, in memory of 720 farmers who sacrificed their lives during the movement. Farmers from all over India collected soil from the places where the farmers’ movements were held and stored them in small pots. These pots were then brought to Shahjahanpur in a “Jattha-Yatra”, where a program was organised in remembrance of the martyrs and a martyr’s memorial was constructed. The “Shaheed Smarak” is still there at the historical movement site of Shahjahanpur–Kheda.

Activity chart of a day in the struggle site

Early morning, after breakfast from the common kitchen, 10–15 farmers would volunteer to go on fast every day. They would break the fast when another 15 fellow farmers sit on fasting the next day. The farmer leaders would address the gathering every day, explaining the progress and development of

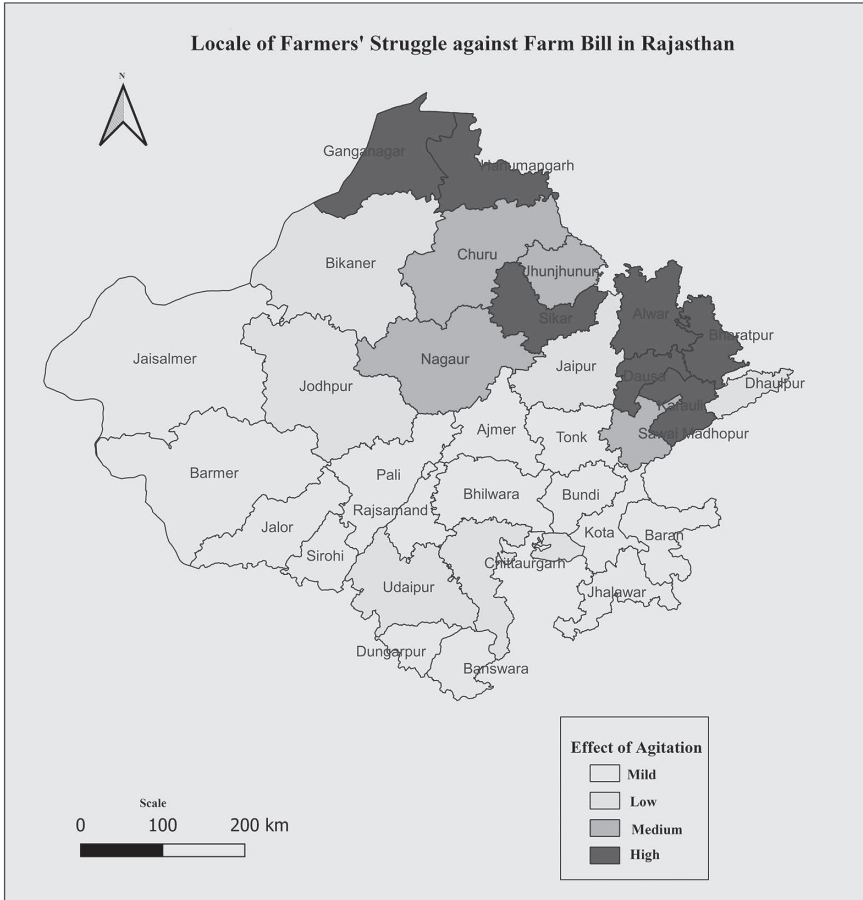


Figure 9.2 Locale of Farmers' Struggle against Farm Bills in Rajasthan.

the struggle and the next course of action. The public meeting would continue till 5 pm every day. Media persons would be briefed after the public meeting. Leaders of all farmers' organisations would hold a meeting at the protest site in the evening. In the meeting, a critical review of activities conducted during the day, and the plan of action for the next day would be discussed by the SKM. Cultural programmes were organised in the night at the site of the movement. Artists from different states would present their art forms in the cultural activity for hours at the site of struggle.

Sikhs and Gurudwaras in the farm struggle

The *Gurudwara's langar* and Sikh social organisations such as *Khalsa Aid* and *Hemkund Foundation* have played important roles in the farmers'

movement. A few days after the onset of the struggle, *Gurudwaras* set up special *langars* for the Joint *Kisan Morcha* at the site of farmers' agitation. Hundreds of men and women worked in the *langars* set up by the *Gurudwara* of Kota, Patiala, Pokaran, and Gharsana at the *Morcha* site, only to ensure that even a single farmer in the movement would not be deprived of food and basic necessities of life. Farmers from Kerala sent tons of cashews, almonds, and pistachios, while the organisation of children had sent clothes for the farmers. Sikh organisations from different parts of the country supplied toothbrush, toothpaste, slippers, shoes, clothes, particularly woolen clothes, and other necessary materials in large quantities to farmers at the site of the *morcha*. Farmers from Punjab brought truckload of *pinni* (a round-shaped sweet made up of deshi ghee, natural gum, and wheat flour) in the winter season, and every morning they distributed it among the farmers. It is not an exaggeration to say that this movement became a question of honour for Sikh farmers. They believed that if we lost this movement, it will be remembered as a great defeat of the Sikh farming community.

Support from organisations and individuals

Organisations from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and other states collected donations from villagers and sent it across to the *morchas*. To provide drinking water to the site of the *morcha*, two water purifier plants (RO system) costing lakhs of rupees were set up by supporting organisations by collecting donations from farmers in the villages. Farmers' children, who were living in different states and abroad, made frequent phone calls to the centre of the Joint Farmers' *Morcha* union office to ensure that the farmers at the site of the struggle have everything at their disposal. Over the phone, students studying abroad frequently asked, "Please tell us, brothers, if you need anything. We know you are there for us and for our parents. Without you, we are nothing". The Joint *Kisan Morcha* received legal, administrative, and intellectual support from organisations of teachers, lawyers, and other government employees from different states. Along with this, traders and their organisations from all over the country also extended their support to the movement. For instance, Sri Ganganagar Vyapar Mandal donated a bread-making machine along with a generator for the movement.

The local farmers were engaged in supplying necessary food articles and other materials to the movement site. Radheshyam Shuklawas, a farmer from Kotputli block in Jaipur, reported:

I am directly involved in the activities at the *Morcha* site by rendering services such as cleaning the *Morcha* site, disposing of food waste, cleaning the toilet, supplying drinking water, buttermilk, milk and vegetables for the fellow farmers. These items were collected from Kotputli and adjoining villages and Dhanis.

Role of Mewati *langar* and Mevs in the movement

The Joint *Kisan Morcha* and the point of convergence of farmers from different parts of the country at the Shahjahanpur–Kheda border are situated in the Mewat region. The region has a fledgling face of communal riot and caste-based political polarisation spearheaded by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The Mewat area had witnessed several mob lynchings in connection with the cow protection committee (*Gauraksha Dal*) in the past, and the victims were invariably Muslims. In 2017, a trader called Pehlu Khan from a minority community was lynched in public by a mob self-proclaimed as *Gauraksha Dal* (India Today, 2017). The victim was allegedly charged with transporting cows for slaughtering. The farmers' movement changed the perception of people's communal hatred. As a result, Mev⁴ farmers of the Mewat area established a Tea *Langar* (serving free tea) for farmers, and it continued throughout the movement. Farmers collected milk from every household in the nearby villages to supply tea to the farmers.⁵ More importantly, Mewati farmers and fellow villagers celebrated all major festivals of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian communities together for the first time in their lives. The farmers' movement was a befitting reply to the communal polarisation plank of the BJP–RSS and Muslim extremists in the area. A notable achievement of the farmers' movement was that it had transformed a place notorious for communal violence into a place of brotherhood and communal harmony. Some prominent local Mewati farmers such as Maulana Haneef, Shifat Manager, Raesa Bairwa, and Virendra Vidrohi played important roles in uniting the Mewati farmers for the farmers' cause beyond the religious boundaries. Virendra Vidrohi, a social activist and farmer from the Mewat region, echoed the Mewati farmers' voice and said:

Almost every family from the farmers' community in Mewat region had contributed to this movement. When the Mewati farmers realised that farmers from distant nooks and corners of the country came to their area for a protest against the Farm Bills 2020, every Mewati farmer's family contributed to the movement by supplying milk, fruits, and other food items. They had also established a tea *langar* and supplied tea to the farmers at the *morcha*. This is a big battle and comparable to the freedom struggle.

Farmers of northern and eastern Rajasthan

The caste–class dynamics of labour relations in agriculture in Rajasthan is rather well-known. In rural Rajasthan, there exists different types and natures of labour contracts, wherein agricultural labourers, especially from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, enter into annual wage labour contracts with rich farmers in agriculturally advanced districts like Sri Ganganagar and Hanumangarh in Rajasthan and in the state of Punjab (Singh, 2022b). The labourers in annual contracts get trapped in long-term indebtedness, which

attaches the labour and his family to the rich farmers. Even under such a situation, farmers and wage labourers joined together against Farm Bills 2020. The attack on leaders of the farmers' movement in Ghazipur changed the tone and tenor of the movement. Farmers turned up in large numbers on the borders when the police and henchmen of the ruling party in the centre mounted pressure on the Ghazipur border protest site. Farmers, students, youths, women, and employees of various organisations such as railways, lawyers, and teachers from the eastern districts of Rajasthan collected lakhs of rupees and sent it to the *Kisan Morcha* to strengthen the struggle. Farmers from the eastern part of Rajasthan made arrangements for a permanent meeting place at the site of the struggle with a full-fledged audio system and generator. They also bought deep freezers and other necessary electronic machines for farmers at the *morcha* who braved the scorching sun in May and June. People from eastern Rajasthan held several meetings and organised *dangals*⁶ to make people aware of the consequences of Farm Bills 2020. Male and female protesters danced together on drum beat with songs composed on traditional lyrics in the *dangal* form of traditional art of eastern Rajasthan.

Role of political organisations

Left political organisations played a vital role in the farmers' movement. Unlike other organisations, the left political organisations worked for a logical conclusion of the struggle in favour of farmers in India. On the contrary, the right-wing political outfits construed the active engagement of the left organisations in the farmers' movement as a hatched-up plot to hijack the movement. Several political ideologies and interests were working together with their contradictions and differences.

The government at the centre and in the state of Haryana were hostile to the peasant movement and their struggle. The rank and file of political supporters of the government resorted to nefarious strategies to weaken the farmers' movement by attempting commotions in the struggle site. Furthermore, supporters of the ruling party at the centre designed divisive ways, employing caste and religious identities of protesting farmers to divide and stop the movement (Daniyal & Lalwani, 2021; Ramakrishnan, 2021). It needs to be admitted that the Congress government of Rajasthan extended support to the farmers' movement rather indirectly. They knew that any movement against the political coalition at the centre would work to the advantage of the Congress government in Rajasthan. Congress leaders supported the struggle by releasing statements to the media favouring the farmers' struggle. Indeed, the Congress party's support for the farmers' movement yielded a positive outcome in the local body election in the areas adjacent to the farm struggle (Hindustan Times, 2021). In the local body elections held immediately after the farmers' movement in Rajasthan, farmer leaders who were active in the movement won the elections with a thumping majority (Shekhar, 2021).

The ruling political coalition at the centre and the states used all weapons in their arsenal to weaken the farmers' struggle by fielding self-styled leaders of the *Bhartiya Kisan Sangh*, who were notorious for their foreclosing and opportunistic stand in politics. Those handpicked and self-styled leaders of political organisations came and formed separate gatherings adjacent to the site of the struggle at the Shahjahanpur–Kheda border. A few days later, they announced the withdrawal from the farmers' struggle, alleging that the farmers' protest had become anti-national. They referred to the incident in New Delhi on January 26, 2021, as a case of intrusion of anti-national elements into the farmers' movement. The objective was to create confusion among the rank and file of the farmers' movement. A self-styled farmer leader from a local political party (a coalition partner of the NDA in Rajasthan) announced that he and his followers would join the farmers' movement. The hidden agenda was to brake the movement. Their march to New Delhi against Farm Bills was dispersed within a day, and its motto was to confuse farmers who are genuinely concerned about the ill effects of the Farm Bills. Such fake counter-movements could not firm up their ground in the field and died down sooner than later.

Conclusion

The farmers' movement against the three farm laws was historic in many ways (Mohankumar, 2021). It instilled confidence not only in the farmers who have been facing the onslaught of the anti-farmer policies but also among other marginalised groups in India. This platform was used effectively to sensitise the plight of farmers in the country under neoliberal economic policies. The voice of the movement echoed in the furthest of the villages across India. The movement against the farm laws has given rise to fights against the corporations and capital, which is desperate to enter the agriculture sector in India to take over the land and control over the trading and marketing of the agri-produce. Farmers in the state of Rajasthan built on a rich legacy of farmers' struggles and led a year-long rather challenging but successful protest *morcha* in the most disadvantaged conditions. The victory of this agitation offers hope for more struggles on the people's issues in the times to come. In a nutshell, it can be added that the farmers' struggle in India has categorically proved and convinced every member of the farming community in India, cutting across partisan political affiliations, that the unscrupulous and indiscriminate embracing of neoliberal capitalism by the governments can be stopped only with mass movements, and it has to be continued.

Notes

- 1 There was a call for a national strike on November 26 by all CTUs (barring *Bhartiya Majdoor Sangh*) to show solidarity with the farmers' strike in India. A notable characteristic feature of the farmers' struggle was that it could receive solidarity

- from all trade unions in India. Whenever the Joint Farmers' Movement gave a call for a nation-wide strike, the CTU stood by it in its letter and spirit and supported the farmers' movement and vice versa.
- 2 We acknowledge the academic assistance rendered by Swathi Lekha Sen for the study. She prepared the maps using QGIS open-source V9.1 GIS software.
 - 3 There are many petrol pumps on both sides of the Haryana boarder on NH 48. Petrol and diesel prices in Haryana are 10% lower than that in Rajasthan. Truck owners buy diesel from this area as soon as they cross the Rajasthan boarder and enter the Haryana Boarder. Therefore, only petrol pump owners from the borders on the Haryana side are referred here.
 - 4 Mev farmers are historically known for their cattle rearing occupation. In the recent past, the area figured prominently in the media for mob lynching incidences by the *Gauraksha Dal* (affiliated to BJP-RSS).
 - 5 Mewati farmers put a large *Can* (big utensil made of metal) in every village for pouring milk for the *morchha*. A women farmer while pouring milk in the can uttered: "if I do not give milk to my children for a few days, nothing will happen to them. Those at the *morchha* need milk because they are there to die for us".
 - 6 *Dangal* is a traditional art form in eastern Rajasthan. People perform the art by beating the drum, dancing, and singing. They sang traditional songs of political satire.

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Appendix 1

List of farmers interviewed

1. Amra Ram, Sikar (Ex MLA, Dhodh, Rajasthan)
2. Baba Jayamal Singh, Patiyala, Punjab (continuously running *langar* services for a year)
3. Balwan Poonia, Bhadra, Hanumangarh (MLA, Bhadra)
4. Balwinder Singh, Bari, Dholpur
5. Bapu Ram Baranda, Dungarpur
6. Bhagirath Ram Netad, Didwana, Nagaur
7. Dharmaram Vishnoi, Makrana, Nagaur
8. Girdhari Mahala, Jhunjhunu
9. Gopal Vishnoi, Masruwala, Hanumangarh
10. Harphool Singh, Dantaramgarh, Sikar
11. Hema Ram Arya, Makrana, Nagaur
12. Jawan Singh Mohcha, Vazirpur, Sawai Madhopur
14. Kalu Thori, Raisingh Nagar, Sri Ganganagar
16. Motilal Sharma, Makrana, Nagaur
17. Narayan Ram Dudi, Makrana, Nagaur
18. Nirmal Kumar Prajapat, Taranagar, Churu
19. Prabhu Lal Meena, Jhadol, Udaipur
20. Prithvi Raj, Vijayanagar, Sri Ganganagar
21. Radheshyam Shuklawas, Kotputli, Jaipur
22. Raghuveer Verma, Hanumangarh
23. Rajaram Meel, Suratgarh, Sri Ganganagar (state president, BKU (Tikait))
24. Rajendra Prasad Yadav, Kotputli, Jaipur
25. Rajesh Sighvi, Udaipur
26. Ramesh Chaudhary, Makrana, Nagaur
27. Ramprasad Jangid, Fatehpur, Sikar
28. Ram Singh Rathore, Makrana, Nagaur
29. Ranjit Singh Raju, Karanpur, Sri Ganganagar (convener, GKS)
30. Rekham Ghotia, Makrana, Nagaur
31. Shashikant Sharma, Mundawar, Alwar
32. Shital Kanwar, Bawdi, Jodhpur
33. Shyopat Ram, Raisinghnagar, Sri Ganganagar
34. Surender Dharnia, Sri Ganganagar
35. Virender Vidrohi, Mewati Kisan, Alwar



Debanjan Roy

10 The farmers' protests in Maharashtra

Ashok Dhawale and Amit Narkar

Introduction

Several rivers of struggle around the country culminated in the ocean of the historic and victorious farmers' struggle on the borders of the national capital Delhi, which continued for an unprecedented one year and 15 days from November 26, 2020, to December 11, 2021. All these rivers of struggle attacked different aspects of the Modi-led BJP government's policies.

One of these mighty rivers consisted of the various large farmers' struggles in Maharashtra.

The farmers of Maharashtra strongly supported the historic farmers' struggle in Delhi. Apart from actual participation in the protests at the borders of the national capital, Maharashtra witnessed many local-level actions in support of the national level farmers' protests against the three farm laws. From massive actions like the vehicle rally from Nashik to Delhi and two Kisan Mahapanchayats in Mumbai, to very local programmes like the women farmers' conference and *Kisan Bagh* (farmers' encampment) in Pune, the Maharashtra mobilisation saw a variety of forms of protests and solidarity support. The local-level actions were organised in many places across the state in response to the various calls of the *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM) for solidarity support to the protesting farmers. These solidarity actions helped build momentum across the state and ensure large-scale participation in the protests at the Delhi borders.

Methodology

Agriculture and farmers of Maharashtra have been long neglected by the policy-makers and successive governments. This ill-treatment has led to a deep-seated agrarian crisis in the state. The farmers' protests in the state can be better understood against the backdrop of the agrarian situation in the state. Maharashtra has a rich history of farmers' and peasants' protests – for example the Satara Parallel Government against the British rule from 1943 to 1946, the Warli *Adivasi* uprising from 1945 to 1947, and the Shetkari Sanghatana-led agitations for remunerative prices for sugar cane and milk in the decades of 1980s and 1990s, to the latest unprecedented *Kisan Long March* from Nashik

to Mumbai in 2018. This chapter tries to draw from the history of the peasants' and farmers' movements in the state, and document and understand the mobilisations in support of the farmers protesting the three farm laws.

The authors have used information from secondary sources including official government documents, like the Economic Survey of Maharashtra, and data published by government organisations. The authors have used news reports and reportage about the protests and solidarity actions in the state, and references from the accounts of the farmers' struggles and recent mobilisation in Maharashtra written by journalists and activists published in journals, books and also on websites and portals.

The lead author of this chapter, Dr. Ashok Dhawale, is the national president of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS). He played an instrumental role in the formation of the broad-based alliance of various farmers' organisations under the banner of the SKM, which led the farmers' protests against the three anti-people farm laws. He has been guiding and actively leading the farmers' struggles in Maharashtra under the banner of the AIKS for the past three decades. This chapter is an account of an insider who has not only witnessed but also shaped the national-level farmers' protests against the three draconian farm laws. The second author, Amit Narkar, has been studying issues in agriculture and rural development of Maharashtra.

This chapter tries to capture important actions and processes that led to the strong solidarity support from the state of Maharashtra.

The background

The agrarian distress in Maharashtra

Maharashtra continues to top the list with the highest number of farmers' suicides in the country. The state once famous for path-breaking innovations in agriculture and trend-setting policies for agricultural and rural development has now won repute for being one of the worst states for farmers and land-tillers. The never-ending phenomenon of farmers' suicides is the penultimate result of deep-rooted agrarian distress in the state. This distress is caused by anti-farmer and anti-agriculture policies pursued by the successive central and state governments over the last three decades (Narkar, 2018).

Declining share of the agriculture and allied sectors in the state's growth

Among the large states in the country, Maharashtra ranks first with the highest gross state domestic product (GSDP) and highest per capita income. This impressive picture of the state's economy, however, is heavily skewed. The state's majority population still depends on the agriculture and allied sectors for livelihood. The share of this sector in the state's economy has shown a declining trend over time. Barring a few exceptions, the agriculture and allied activities sector has recorded a negative growth rate in the recent past. Allied

activities such as livestock have not been able to make up for the impact of shrinking livelihood support from core farming activities. The depressed situation in the agriculture and allied activities sector has aggravated overall rural distress in the state. Table 10.1 presents the dismal performance of the agriculture and allied activities sector in the state's economy before the massive farmers' protests began in the state.

The patterns in land utilisation, land under different crops, and yield are also disturbing. The successive Economic Surveys of the state admit to the fact of a decline in the area under cereals and pulses, and a decline in their total production, in both kharif and rabi seasons (Table 10.2).

A steeper decrease in the area under foodgrains, in oilseeds, and in their production in the Rabi season is a clear indication of the absence of sufficient protective irrigation in the state. The state that boasts of having the highest number of dams in the country irrigates only 18% of arable land.

Small and marginal landowners

Because the state's majority landowners are small and marginal (operational holding size of up to 2 hectare), protective irrigation and state support for food crops become essential for their survival. And this is completely neglected

Table 10.1 Growth Rate of the Agriculture and Allied Activities Sector in Maharashtra

	2014– 2015	2015– 2016	2016– 2017	2017– 2018	2018– 2019	2019– 2020
Agriculture + Allied Activities	(–) 10.7	(–) 3.7	21.0	(–) 0.7	(–) 2.1	8.4
Crops	(–) 16.7	(–) 7.5	25.0	(–) 5.1	(–) 7.6	7.8
Livestock	4.0	4.8	11.5	8.5	7.8	4.4
Forestry–logging	2.8	3.4	18.0	9.3	8.6	17.7
Fishing–aquaculture	7.0	(–) 4.2	21.2	(–) 11.5	(–) 10.6	7.8

Source: The Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2021–2022.

Table 10.2 Change in Area under and Production of Principal Crops between 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 (%)

<i>Season</i>	<i>Kharif</i>		<i>Rabi</i>	
<i>Crop</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Production</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Production</i>
Foodgrains	(–) 3	(–) 15	(–) 31	(–) 30
Cereals	(–) 3	(–) 4	(–) 42	(–) 39
Pulses	(–) 3	(–) 46	(–) 6	(–) 4
Oilseeds	(–) 1	(–) 15	(–) 60	(–) 73
Cotton	(–) 0.14	(–) 44	--	--
Sugarcane	43	25	--	--

Source: Compiled from the Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2017–2018

by the state's agriculture policy. The average size holding for Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and women farmers is far less compared to others. Reduction in the average size of operational holdings, an increasing number of small and marginal farmers, and uncertainty regarding the guaranteed availability of inputs at affordable prices, output and market, and support systems have added to the drudgery of the state's farmers. The farmers, especially small and marginal farmers, have to increasingly rely on farm and non-farm wage employment for mere survival. The state's high growth rate economy has failed in creating employment and reducing the burden on agriculture and the rural economy. The proportion of workers working in the agriculture and allied sectors in the state has increased from 45.1% (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Maharashtra, 2018) to 46.1% (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Maharashtra, 2022).

The escalating cost of living in rural areas

The decline in prospects of a better life in agriculture and other areas in rural Maharashtra is coupled with the rising cost of living adding fuel to the fire. The calculations by the Labour Bureau of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Agricultural Labourers and Rural Labourers clearly show that for both the categories of rural workers, the CPI has always remained higher than the all-India figures (Table 10.3).

The state's failure on all fronts to ensure the development of agriculture and the rural economy has led to a disastrous situation. The struggles of farmers are in response to this hopeless situation.

Farmers' groups and political organisations have been agitating, taking up various farm-related demands from time to time. The *Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana* became a formidable political force in the state's polity, thanks to the massive organised struggles it waged for fair prices for farm produce, particularly for sugarcane. These often-successful struggles were replicated in other agriculture-allied occupations such as milk production. The state has witnessed militant farmers' movements over the last two decades.

Table 10.3 CPI for Agricultural and Rural Labourers, 2019–2020 (base year 1986–1987 = 100)

<i>CPI for Agricultural Labourers</i>	<i>Maharashtra</i>	<i>All India</i>
Food group	1131	932
General index	1094	980
<i>CPI for Rural Labourers</i>		
Food group	1113	937
General index	1084	986

Source: Labour Bureau, Simla, GoI (reproduced from the Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2021–2022)

The recent farmers' struggles in Maharashtra

The struggles spearheaded by the AIKS in Maharashtra (and Rajasthan) from 2016 to 2018 contributed greatly to building up the resistance of the peasantry at the all-India level. The 1 lakh-strong two-day AIKS-led *Mahapadav* in Nashik in March 2016; the 50,000-strong 2-day *Adivasi Mahagherao* at Wada in Palghar district in October 2016; the united 11-day Maharashtra farmers' strike in June 2017; and the remarkable *Kisan Long March* from Nashik to Mumbai organised by the Maharashtra AIKS in March 2018 – all these became sources of inspiration for the entire democratic movement in the country.

The struggles in Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Jharkhand, and elsewhere succeeded in wresting concessions from the BJP- and Congress-led governments in these states.

On March 29–30, 2016, over one lakh farmers under the AIKS banner gathered at the huge Golf Club Maidan in Nashik. After the massive public meeting, which was addressed by Sitaram Yechury, Hannan Mollah, and P. Sainath, among others, the huge mass marched to the main square in Nashik and blocked it for two days and two nights. All top government and police authorities were persuading the farmers to go back to the Golf Club Maidan and continue the agitation. The protesting farmers refused. The entire city of Nashik was locked. Within 12 hours, the then BJP chief minister was forced to invite the AIKS delegation for talks in Mumbai (Dhawale, 2020b).

The united farmers' strike for loan waiver in Maharashtra, 2017

On June 1, 2017, after a lot of preparation, a novel united farmers' strike began in Maharashtra for loan waiver and remunerative prices. Farmers stopped getting their milk, vegetables, and fruits for sale in the cities in an unprecedented move. On June 3, some of the leaders of the strike, while negotiating with the BJP chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, sold out. Without getting anything concrete in hand, they decided to withdraw the strike. At this point, AIKS state general secretary, Dr Ajit Nawale, who was part of the talks with the chief minister, walked out, announced the betrayal to the media, and declared the resolve of the farmers to continue the strike until a loan waiver was wrested.

The AIKS leadership mobilised other farmers' organisations to continue the strike, and this effort bore fruit. Dr Ajit Nawale was elected the convenor of the coordination committee leading the strike. A massive Maharashtra bandh to support the farmers' strike was held on June 5. A convention was held at Nashik on June 8. It called for a statewide Rail Roko agitation on June 13. The momentum of the farmers' strike increased with every passing day.

On June 11, under this pressure, the BJP state government was forced to bend. It called the coordination committee for talks. It initially agreed to a complete loan waiver to the peasantry. Later, it went back on its word and imposed several onerous conditions.

A series of agitations was led against this betrayal of the BJP regime. The largest was a two lakh-strong joint statewide road blockade in over 200 centres in 31 districts of the state on August 14, 2017.

When all this failed to move the government, the AIKS embarked upon the unprecedented *Kisan Long March* of 50,000 peasants from Nashik to Mumbai from March 6 to 12, 2018. Under tremendous public pressure and media coverage generated by the *Kisan Long March*, the state government was forced to concede many demands in writing and also had to place the agreement with the AIKS on the floor of both houses of the state legislature.

The chief minister declared a Rs 34,000 crore loan waiver package of Rs 1.5 lakh each to 89.87 lakh peasants out of 1.36 crore peasants in the state. However, due to the obstructive conditions imposed, by the end of December 2019, the loan waiver had benefited 44.23 lakh farmers who received a loan waiver benefit of Rs 19,843 crores.

The struggle for extending the loan waiver continued even later, and the *Maha Vikas Aghadi* (MVA) state government that came to power in November 2019 increased the loan waiver amount to Rs 2 lakh each and expanded the ambit of the scheme. Till the end of December 2021, 31.71 lakh more farmers received the additional benefit of loan waiver amounting to Rs 20,243 crores.

Thus, in the five years from 2017 to 2021, a total of 75.94 lakh farmers in Maharashtra succeeded in wresting a total loan waiver of Rs 40,086 crores from the state government through their struggle. Although many farmers were still left out, this was a very significant achievement for the peasant movement, in which the AIKS played a major role.

The AIKS-led historic Kisan Long March, 2018

The *Kisan Long March* stands out in the long list of farmers' and peasants' struggles in the state on multiple accounts. The march covered a distance of over 200 km from Nashik to Mumbai, drawing around 50,000 farmers and agricultural labourers with massive participation of *Adivasi* peasants from Nashik, Thane–Palghar, and Ahmednagar districts.

The march was planned with demands ranging from implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), land titles under the FRA, expansion of the loan waiver scheme, irrigation facilities to toiling masses, increase in pensions and social security schemes for rural poor and homeless, prohibiting acquisition of land belonging to *Adivasis* in the name of development projects such as Samruddhi Highway, and recognition of and respect for the powers guaranteed by the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act to the *Gram Sabhas* in the matters of land use in tribal areas.

The *Kisan Long March* was not confined to demands such as fair prices and loan waiver. The comprehensive demands of the march transcended the class bias visible in the state's farmers' struggles (which are invariably led and guided by, and often benefit, the rich farmers) and brought to the fore issues faced by the poorer sections of the agrarian and rural society of the state.

The *Kisan Long March* was a conscious effort on part of the organisers to mobilise agrarian, rural, and tribal people and build bridges across classes and communities. A large number of *Adivasis* and women showed the possibility of building a strong resistance to the anti-agriculture, anti-rural poor policy paradigm. The charter of demands of the march is comprehensive and has a proper understanding of short-term achievable demands and long-term policy suggestions.

This definitely played a role in shaping the farmers' struggle at the national level. The demands for fair price or remunerative price are often wrongly dubbed as demands of rich farmers. The character of the AIKS-led farmers' agitations in Maharashtra, and the *Kisan Long March* in particular, also contributed to making the farmers' struggle truly inclusive.

The state government, however, did not fulfil the promises, especially those about remunerative prices for agricultural produce. This resulted in a major crisis for milk farmers. While the state government declared an MSP for milk at Rs 27 per litre, milk farmers were being paid only Rs 17 per litre by the cooperative and private milk processors. And milk was being sold in the cities at the rate of Rs 45 per litre and above. Hence, this became a major bone of contention. But beyond taking some cosmetic measures, the state government did nothing substantial. In order to focus on the issue of milk price, the AIKS along with some other peasant organisations led a novel week-long agitation in around 10 milk-producing districts of western Maharashtra and Marathwada from May 3 to 9, 2018. Throughout the week, farmers distributed their milk free to the poor instead of selling it at so cheap a price. This was widely covered by the media and put the state government on the defensive.

Similarly, dues in excess of thousands of crores of rupees were not paid by sugarcane factories to cane farmers in the state. The AIKS led a joint struggle for remunerative price for sugarcane.

The June struggle

On June 1, 2018, the first anniversary of the farmers' strike of 2017, a united struggle was launched to highlight the unfulfilled demands of the farmers' strike and to raise the milk price issue. This struggle was waged jointly by the AIKS, *Prahaar*, *Bhumiputra Shetkari Sanghatana*, *Sharad Joshi Vichar Manch*, *Lakhganga Andolan*, *Shetkari Kruti Samiti*, *Bharat Krushak Samaj*, and *Bhrashtachar Virodhi Jan Andolan*.

On June 1, 2018, thousands of farmers held large rallies and gheraoed the district collectorates and tehsil offices. Apart from zeroing in on the state-level demands, they also wrested several local demands from the authorities.

On June 5, in another novel action to put the BJP-led central and state governments on the defensive, hundreds of farmers presented to the local government officials packets of tur dal imported by the Modi regime from Mozambique, sugar imported by the Modi regime from Pakistan, and milk brought by the state government from companies of other states. The farmers highlighted these as some of the reasons for the falling prices.

On June 10, there took place large road blockade actions all over the state against the callousness of both the central and state governments headed by the BJP.

The June actions took place in 22 districts of the state. The two largest actions took place on June 1 at Akole tehsil in Ahmednagar district and on June 12 at Surgana tehsil in Nashik district. At Akole, over 5,000 peasants and workers marched and gheraoed the tehsil office for three hours until local demands were conceded. At Surgana, over 7,000 peasants marched and gheraoed the tehsil office for six hours while the sub-divisional officer (SDO), tehsildar, and other officials conceded all the local demands (Dhawale & Nawale, 2018; Zunjar, 2021).

The August Jail Bharo and the Delhi Rallies

On August 9, 2018, well over five lakh peasants and workers under the leadership of the farmers' unions (like the AIKS), agricultural workers' unions (AIAWU), and trade unions (CITU) courted arrest at over 610 centres in 407 districts in 23 states across the country. The largest and most militant participation in this struggle was in West Bengal, followed by Maharashtra and Bihar. This was by far the largest nationwide *Jail Bharo* struggle in the country in recent times. It was a fine example of worker-peasant unity. This was followed by the two-lakh-strong march to parliament by workers, peasants, and agricultural workers on September 5, 2018.

The *All India Kisan Sanghash Coordination Committee* (AIKSCC) organised a *Kisan Mukti March* in Delhi on November 29–30, 2018. Five kisan marches under the AIKSCC banner began from the outskirts of Delhi, and they all came together at the Ramlila Maidan in the evening. The march from Nizamuddin, which was the largest, comprised farmers from the southern and central states including Maharashtra (Dhawale, 2018).

The second Kisan Long March

Nearly a year after the first *Kisan Long March* from March 6 to 12, 2018, the AIKS Maharashtra state council decided to launch a second massive *Kisan Long March* in defence of the rights of the peasantry. Poor implementation of the promises made during the previous long march, drought in the state, and the central government's betrayal of farmers and agricultural workers were the focal points of this second long march (Dhawale, 2019).

This long march was to begin from Nashik on February 20, 2019, the martyrdom anniversary of Comrade Govind Pansare, and culminate in Mumbai on February 27, 2019, the martyrdom anniversary of Chandrashekhar Azad. But the March was deferred by a day as the state police stopped scores of farmers approaching Nashik from the adjoining districts of Thane, Palghar, and Ahmednagar. The march was suspended after walking a distance on February 21 after a meeting with the state government representatives yielded a positive outcome (Press Trust of India, 2019).

Maharashtra farmers in solidarity with the national struggle

The Modi-led BJP government did not have a clear majority in the Rajya Sabha. The proposed farm laws were likely to be defeated in the upper house. Seeing this possibility, the Modi government adopted a backdoor policy and passed three ordinances. The farmers' organisations rose in protest of these ordinances. The AIKSCC had been formed earlier in 2017 at the national level, in response to the police firing at Mandsaur by the BJP government of Madhya Pradesh, which led to the death of six farmers. It now gave a call to the farmers from across the country to resist these anti-farm ordinances. Farmers rose in protest in different states. Maharashtra witnessed one of the most organised and sustained mobilisations of farmers against these ordinances (and later the farm laws).

The AIKSCC had given a call for a nationwide Rasta Roko on September 25, 2020. Over 35,000 peasants at 83 centres in 23 districts of Maharashtra, led by the AIKS, responded to the AIKSCC's call and blocked the national and state highways in Maharashtra. They held demonstrations and burnt copies of the three anti-farmer and pro-corporate agricultural bills. In some districts, they included a large number of women and youth led by women's and youth organisations. These were the largest mass actions in Maharashtra ever since the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown began in March 2020.

The districts with the largest participation were Thane–Palghar (15,500 in 18 centres), Nashik (12,800 in 4 centres), Nanded (1,800 in 9 centres), Ahmednagar (1,500 in 1 centre), Yavatmal (840 in 5 centres), and Beed (550 in 5 centres).

There were massive rasta roko actions in Thane–Palghar, Nashik, and Ahmednagar districts, in which a total of over 25,000 peasants participated.

In Palghar district, over 8,000 peasants blocked the Mumbai–Delhi National Highway at Charoti in Dahanu tehsil, and 1,000 more blocked the same highway at Boisar Naka in Palghar tehsil. In Beed district, over 300 peasants blocked the Mumbai–Visakhapatnam National Highway at three places in Majalgaon tehsil – Mothewadi, Talkhed, and Nitrud.

At several other places in Nashik, Palghar, and Ahmednagar districts, state highways were blocked by peasants, the majority of them being *Adivasis*.

Other districts from western Maharashtra, Vidarbha, Marathwada, and north Maharashtra also witnessed good participation of peasants and farmers.

Solidarity actions by trade unions and women's and youth organisations were held in cities.

In a few places, workers of left parties like CPI, Peasants and Workers Party of India (PWP), and Lal Nishan Party (LNP), and secular parties like Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Congress, Bahujan Vikas Aghadi (BVA), and Rashtra Seva Dal also took part in joint protests. Shiv Sena activists also took part in Akole block of Ahmednagar district.

The main constituent organisations of the AIKSCC like the CPI(M)-led AIKS, CPI-led *Kisan Sabha*, *Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana*, National Alliance of People's Movements, *Lok Sangharsh Morcha*, and others participated in this protest across Maharashtra (Peoples Democracy, 2020).

As the farmers' protest intensified at the borders of the national capital, farmers' organisations, and other mass organisations in different states also organised solidarity actions in support of lakhs of farmers from the northern states who were protesting at the Delhi borders. Maharashtra witnessed massive actions in November and December 2020. The first was the response to the nationwide working-class strike and the nationwide peasant upsurge on November 26.

These struggles demanded a rollback of the three Farm Acts, the four labour codes, and the Electricity Amendment Bill and saw worker–peasant unity in action. They were preceded by a widespread campaign of meetings, leaflet distribution, press conferences, and social media activity.

These actions were led by a united coalition of three platforms – the Trade Unions Joint Action Committee (TUJAC), the AIKSCC, and the *Jan Aandolananchi Sangharsha Samiti* (JASS) (Struggle Committee of Mass Movements), an umbrella front of all leading class, mass, and social organisations in Maharashtra. Along with the massive participation by trade unions and farmers' organisations, student, youth, and women's organisations also took an active part in all these actions.

Huge working class strike

On November 26, 2020, strikes were widespread in industrial centres and in the manufacturing sector of Mumbai, Pune, Nashik, Aurangabad, Nagpur, and Solapur. Lakhs of organised, unorganised, and scheme workers took part in the strike all over the state.

Along with the strike, big mass meetings were held in Nashik and Pune. In Mumbai, Aurangabad, Solapur, Kolhapur, Nagpur, and most other districts in the state, large demonstrations were held at multiple locations. In Solapur, under CITU leadership, over 16,000 workers braved repression and led a rally to the district collectorate. The actions were often in the form of human chains because of COVID-19 restrictions. In Mumbai, large human chains were organised in different parts of the city by all unions in TUJAC, and they mobilised an estimated one lakh people.

Large peasant actions

Simultaneously, on November 26, thousands of peasants conducted massive road blockades on the national and state highways. Many of these highways were blocked for many hours. In many other places, there were large marches and demonstrations at district and tehsil centres.

On December 3, 2020, farmers and other mass organisations held demonstrations at the tehsil offices across Maharashtra in solidarity with the protesting farmers at Delhi borders. Thane, Palghar, Nashik, Solapur, Pune, and Parbhani saw a huge mobilisation of farmers and other toiling masses. These agitations received support from the three main political parties, viz., Shiv Sena, INC, and NCP – partners in the MVA, the then-ruling coalition

in the state. Larger umbrella coalitions of civil society organisations and mass movements like the *Samvidhan Samvardhan Samiti* also led protests in a few urban centres. Agricultural workers and landless labourers along with youth organisations joined the protests in large numbers in regions like Marathwada.

These protests evoked support from the intellectuals as well. More than 60 luminaries from the literature and arts signed a letter condemning the anti-democratic and insensitive behaviour of the Modi government and demanded a repeal of the laws. The joint letter said, “The Farm bills were passed in a highly condemnable way. Since then, farmers are on the streets, demanding a repeal of these laws. Government should have listened to them first but instead, it used tear gas and water cannons. This is atrocious” (Tirodkar, 2020).

On December 14, at the nationwide call of the SKM, big *dharnas* (mass sit-ins) and demonstrations were held at several districts and tehsil centres.

Massive Bharat Bandh

The *Bharat Bandh* (All India Shut-Down) on December 8 evoked an overwhelming response in Maharashtra. It was by far one of the largest and most spontaneous bandhs in recent history.

Along with the left parties like CPI(M), CPI, and PWP, the bandh was supported by all three main parties in the ruling MVA coalition in the state, viz., the Shiv Sena, NCP, and INC. Other parties like BVA, Samajwadi Party (SP), JD(S), and others also lent their support. Along with the major farmers’ organisations, most of the trade unions and other mass organisations supported the bandh call to the hilt. Lakhs of activists of all the above parties and organisations came to the streets unitedly to make this bandh a truly massive success. All APMCs, including the largest APMC at Vashi in New Mumbai, were completely closed. Several traders’ and transporter organisations came out in full support. Several national and state highways, shops and marketplaces, towns, and cities were closed.

This bandh also witnessed the completely unwarranted police action against the protesters and their leaders. The police *lathi*-charged (caning) agitating farmers and workers, injuring several activists in Solapur. The police also slapped cases on prominent leaders like the CPI(M) state secretary Narasayya Adam. Fifteen leaders were arrested and were in jail for 5 days until they were released on bail.

The success of the bandh showed that the battle had been joined, not only in Maharashtra but also throughout the country, with the BJP–RSS central government along with the Indian and foreign corporates that it represented on the one side and the great majority of the working people of the country on the other. This was greatly helped by the people’s sympathy with and support to the lakhs of farmers who were waging a bitter struggle on the borders of the nation’s capital (Dhawale, 2020a).

Kisan Bagh in Pune

In Pune, where the 19th-century social reformer and crusader of the peasants Jotirao Phule worked, a novel event was organised in solidarity with the national farmers' agitation. Borrowing the idea from the legendary Shaheen Bagh agitation against the proposed draconian Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, several farmers' and workers' groups came together and launched a "*Kisan Bagh*" in Pune. Coalitions of various organisations such as the *Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti* (a coalition of women's organisations and women's rights groups) and *Jan Andolananchi Sangharsh Samiti* (Committee of People's Movements) led this innovative action programme. Many prominent leaders and activists lent their support to the *Kisan Bagh*. Many action programmes similar to the Pune *Kisan Bagh* were organised in various parts of the state (Adnan, 2020; Tupe, 2020).

Vehicle march to Delhi

The farmers of Maharashtra strongly supported the historic farmers' struggle of Delhi. From December 21–25, 2020, over 1,000 farmers from Maharashtra under the AIKS leadership led a 1,300-km vehicle rally from Nashik to the Shahjahanpur border near Delhi. They stayed there in the biting cold for over a week. It was the first big contingent to come from outside the frontline states.

The AIKS in Maharashtra had taken a very active part in all stages of the farmers' struggle, beginning from the nationwide workers' strike and farmers' road blockades on November 26, the solidarity actions on December 3 and 5, and the *Bharat Bandh* on December 8. The AIKS Maharashtra *Jatha* (contingent) from Nashik to Delhi was aimed at further broadening and intensifying the nationwide struggle.

The vehicle march saw participation of women farmers in a large number. The participants included poor farmers and agricultural labourers from different parts of the state. The stories carried by the People's Archive of Rural India clearly reveal that the participating protesters were seldom rich farmers from the state. On the contrary, the participants hailed from the poor peasantry and landless *Adivasis*.

I Really Want to Go to Delhi

Parth M. N.

Narayan Gaikwad, a 73-year-old farmer along with 6 comrades from Kolhapur district's Jambhali village, travelled all the way to Nashik to join the vehicle march. "People say the agitations in Delhi are limited to

farmers from Punjab and Haryana. We want to point out it is a national issue. . . . Travel by road gets tougher with age. But I decided to come because I believe in Bhagat Singh's idea of India. Farmers' problems won't end unless there is a revolution", he said.

Kalebai More, a 65-year-old farm labourer from Shindwad village in Nashik's Dindori taluka, was one of hundreds of women who was in the *jatha*. She said, "I am an agricultural labourer earning Rs 200 in daily wages. I am willing to give it up to take part in the protest". Kalebai depended on other farmers for employment. She said it becomes tough when farmers don't earn from their harvest. "When they don't make money, they don't employ labourers like me", she said. "If their production costs go up because of the increase in power bills, it reduces my work as well". Kalebai belongs to the Mahadev Koli *Adivasi* tribe. In Shindwad, she does subsistence farming on a two-acre plot of land that comes under the forest department.

Parth, 2021, January 9

The vehicle march began on December 21, 2020, from Nashik. The public meeting at the Golf Club Maidan, Nashik, paid homage to the 33 farmers who were martyred in the intensified struggle around Delhi during November and December 2020.

The public meeting condemned the central government's utterly insensitive and obstinate policies targeting peasants and workers to further enrich the corporates, both Indian and foreign. Effigies of corporates Ambani and Adani were publicly burnt. The public meeting gave a call to boycott their goods and services.

The CPI(M) Rajya Sabha MP from Kerala and AIKS joint secretary K Ragesh was the main speaker at the public meeting. Ragesh had fought tooth and nail against the three Farm Bills in the Parliament, and in 2018, he had also placed two seminal bills in the Rajya Sabha on behalf of the AI-KSCC – one for freedom from debt and the other for guarantee of MSP at one and a half times the cost of production. Maharashtra state leaders from CPI-M, CPI, Peasants' and Workers' Party, INC, and RPI along with leaders and representatives of mass organisations also spoke at the meeting.

The 2000-strong vehicle march was given a resounding send-off at this meeting.

Jailed activists join farmers' protests, symbolic hunger strike in solidarity

On December 23, 2020, the intellectuals and activists jailed in the Bhima Koregaon case staged a day-long hunger strike in solidarity with the farmers protesting the three farm laws. In a letter released by their lawyer,

they criticised the central government for pursuing the agenda to grab land from the peasantry, with the aid of the law, and then make farmers serve Adani and Ambani as their masters. The jailed activists lashed out at the central government for having no accountability towards people and for working as servants of capitalism. The letter lauded the protesting farmers for bringing the despotic government to its senses.

Indie Journal (2020, December 23)

Massive peoples' receptions in Maharashtra

The large vehicle *jatha* of cars, tempos, and buses was enthusiastically greeted on the way by hundreds of people. The *jatha* passed through the northern parts of the state before entering Madhya Pradesh. Public meetings were held at important places and saw huge turn-outs of people. On its way, when the *jatha* crossed Malegaon and Dhule, both places that had witnessed communal riots and communal tensions, people belonging to different faiths, castes, and classes wholeheartedly welcomed the *jatha*. It was a spontaneous outburst of people's support for the ongoing nationwide farmers' struggle.

One of the highlights of this AIKS *jatha* in Maharashtra was the full support extended to it by all the non-BJP political parties. These included all three parties in the ruling MVA – the Shiv Sena, NCP, and Congress – and also SP, JD(S), BSP, RPI, BVA, and of course the three left parties – CPI(M), CPI, and PWP. Their leaders welcomed the AIKS *jatha* at several places and also made arrangements for its food, water, and stay. Many other social organisations and NGOs also extended support.

The AIKS Maharashtra *jatha* began in Nashik with over 2,000 farmers in over 100 vehicles. Some of them came right up to the Maharashtra border for two days till December 22 night and then returned. The *jatha* of 1,000 peasants in 50 vehicles proceeded towards Delhi.

Enthusiastic reception in Madhya Pradesh and Shahjahanpur

The AIKS *jatha* entered Madhya Pradesh on the morning of December 23, 2020. Medha Patkar, with hundreds of activists of National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, enthusiastically welcomed the *jatha* at the Sendhu border. It was given a rousing reception by hundreds of workers of the Century Mills and their families at Nimar in Khargone district. It was then given another good public reception at Khalghat in Dhar district. NAPM leader Medha Patkar and activists accompanied the *jatha* right up to Khalghat.

The *jatha* crossed through Madhya Pradesh the whole day and reached Kota in Rajasthan. From there, it headed for Shahjahanpur at the Rajasthan–Haryana border (Dhawale, 2020c).

On December 25, Christmas Day, which was also the 93rd anniversary of the public burning of the Manusmriti in 1927, led by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar at Mahad in Raigad district of Maharashtra, the AIKS Maharashtra vehicle *jatha* of over 1,000 peasants reached the Shahjahanpur border. It was given a rousing welcome by thousands of farmers from Rajasthan, Haryana, and Punjab (Dhawale, 2021).

A large segment of the protesters who travelled from Maharashtra to Shahjahanpur were *Adivasis* fighting for their land titles under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. The people who travelled to Delhi borders braving the biting cold weather included *Adivasi* farmers, other farmers, women farmers, and landless agricultural labourers from different parts of the state – poorest of the poor who carried with them torn blankets, worn-out sweaters, and an unshaken resolve, reported the Telegraph (Parth, 2020).

Preparations for Kisan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat in Mumbai

The SKM decided to intensify the struggle and planned a *Kisan Parade* with a tractor march from the Outer Ring Road to Delhi on Republic Day, January 26, 2021, to mark the completion of two months of the massive struggle.

With the intensification of the nationwide struggle, there arose a need to broaden and strengthen the struggle in Maharashtra. The AIKS took the initiative, and a broad meeting of more than 100 organisations was convened in Mumbai on January 12, 2021. Representatives of most of the state-level organisations in the AIKSCC, TUJAC, JASS, Nation for Farmers, and *Hum Bharat Ke Log* participated in this meeting. They formed a front spearheading the movement. It was named as *Samyukta Shetkari Kamgar Morcha* (SSKM Maharashtra) – the United Peasant Worker Front.

A programme of action was decided in this meeting. The main demands included (i) repealing of the three farm laws and four labour codes, (ii) enacting a central law to guarantee a remunerative MSP and procurement, (iii) withdrawal of the Electricity Amendment Bill, (iv) providing regular pension from the centre to farmers and agricultural workers, and (v) state-specific demands like the implementation of the Mahatma Phule loan waiver scheme and the Forest Rights Act; vesting forest lands, temple lands, and pasture lands in the name of the tillers; and repealing of the 2018 Land Acquisition Act amendments enacted by the previous BJP state government and restoration of the earlier 2014 Act.

The following action programme was decided:

January 14–15 – Public burning of farm laws and labour codes;

January 18 – Women farmers' day;

January 23 – Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's birth anniversary – farmers to leave from their respective districts in vehicles and come to Mumbai for the massive *Mahapadav*;

January 24–26 – Farmers to conduct *Mahapadav* mass-encampment at Azad Maidan, Mumbai;

January 25 – Mass rally to Raj Bhawan;

January 26 – Republic Day hoisting of the national flag at Azad Maidan.

On January 14–15, thousands of working people in Maharashtra made bonfires of the farm acts and labour codes. On January 18, the Women's Kisan day was observed widely all over the state.

On January 14, the SSKM committee met the former union agriculture minister, former chief minister, and NCP chief Sharad Pawar; chief minister and Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray; and state revenue minister and Congress state chief Balasaheb Thorat and requested them to support this struggle on behalf of the MVA. All of them assured full support to the struggle. The SSKM delegation requested the above leaders to convene a special session of the state assembly to deal with the agrarian crisis and related issues; to adopt a state assembly resolution asking the centre to repeal the three farm acts and the four labour codes; and to enact an act for ensuring MSP and other demands.

Women in solidarity with the farmers

Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti (a coalition of women's organisations and women's rights groups) organised a women farmers' conference in Pune on January 18, 2021. This conference was organised to celebrate *Mahila Kisan Din* (Women Farmers' Day) and in response to the SKM call for nationwide protests. The participating women farmers lent their support to the farmers' protest and also highlighted issues faced by women farmers (Tupe, 2021).

Vehicle march to Mumbai

The AIKS Maharashtra unit began a statewide vehicle march of 15,000 farmers hailing from 21 districts of the state, from Nashik to Mumbai on January 23, 2021, on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The march began from the Golf Club Maidan in Nashik in hundreds of tempos, pick-ups, and other vehicles. A large public meeting was held before the march began and was addressed by leaders of all mass fronts. The *jatha* reached Mumbai on March 24, 2021, and joined the joint sit-in struggle – *Mahapadav* – at Azad Maidan organised by the SSKM.

The Mahapanchayat in Mumbai

On January 25, 2021, on the eve of Republic Day, a massive joint statewide convention of around 40,000 peasants, workers, and all other working sections was organised by the SSKM at the famous Azad Maidan in the heart of Mumbai. It included thousands of women and youth.

The political significance of this convention was that it was the first time after many years that all political and social forces opposed to the BJP came together on one platform in Maharashtra. Sharad Pawar and Balasaheb Thorat along with Comrade Hannan Mollah, Medha Patkar, Teesta Setalvad, and P. Sainath addressed the state gathering at the Azad Maidan. Uddhav Thackeray sent a Shiv Sena representative to the *mahapanchayat*. The speakers criticised the BJP regime and the three farm laws, and insisted on an MSP guarantee law and warned that if the central government tried to destroy farmers, they would destroy it instead.

After the *mahapanchayat*, a huge rally began for the Raj Bhawan. The SSKM delegation was to present its charter of demands to Governor Bhagat Singh Koshiyari. But, citing a prior commitment in Goa, he had left Mumbai. On learning this, the SSKM unanimously decided to cancel the delegation to the governor and to publicly tear up the memorandum.

On the morning of January 26, 2021, the national flag was hoisted at the Azad Maidan by Yamunabai Jadhav, a 73-year-old *Adivasi* woman from Nashik district, who had herself walked the entire 200-km stretch of the AIKS-led *Kisan Long March* from Nashik to Mumbai two years ago. The speaker of the Maharashtra assembly, Nana Patole specially remained present for the flag hoisting, along with SSKM leaders.

The January 23–26 actions in Maharashtra had a wide impact in the state and also across the country (Dhawale, 2022).

Lakhimpur Kheri Massacre and Shaheed Kalash Yatras

On October 3, 2021, a convoy of vehicles associated with BJP's Union Minister of State for Home Ajay Mishra Teni, his son Ashish Mishra and other goons ran over several farmer protesters at Tikonia in Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh. This was a brutal and inhuman attack on peacefully protesting farmers led by the SKM. Four farmers and one local journalist were killed in the incident, and several others were seriously injured. On October 4 and 5, 2021, large protests were organised at the district collectorates and other locations in many places across the country including Maharashtra.

The SKM called upon the farmers to organise *Shaheed Asthi Kalash Yatras* in memory of the Lakhimpur Kheri martyrs. These Shaheed Asthi Kalash Yatras were organised across several states and districts in the entire country, and they elicited massive response from the people.

From October 27 to November 27, 2021, the Shaheed Kalash Yatras of the five martyrs of the horrifying Lakhimpur Kheri massacre traversed the whole of Maharashtra, drawing large crowds of farmers wherever they went. These yatras culminated in another massive 30,000-strong Mahapanchayat at the Azad Maidan in Mumbai on November 28, which was addressed by many national leaders of the SKM that was leading the Delhi struggle.

The Lakhimpur Kheri Shaheed Kalash Yatra in Maharashtra began with great enthusiasm on October 27, 2021, at Pune from Mahatma Jotirao Phule's historic house, which had long ago been declared as a national monument. Mahatma Phule (1827–1890) was a champion of the peasantry, an inveterate opponent of the caste system and of women's oppression, and the author of seminal works like *Slavery* and *The Whipcord of the Peasant*. His wife Savitribai Phule was the founder of the first girls' school in India in 1848.

It was a joint effort of all constituent organisations of the AIKSCC, TUJAC, and JASS. Activists from several districts of the state had come for this programme. Women were present in large numbers.

Over the next three weeks, the participating farmers' organisations took the Shaheed Kalash Yatra to the districts. The Shaheed Kalash Yatra travelled 30 districts from October 28 to November 27, 2021.

On November 27, all the Shaheed Kalash Yatras converged in Mumbai and paid homage to the statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji, the Chaitya Bhoomi Memorial to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the statue of Mahatma Gandhi, and the memorial to Martyr Babu Genu (a poor peasant from Pune who became a textile mill worker in Mumbai) who was crushed to death in 1930 by a British-driven truck in Mumbai when he opposed imported British cloth, which the truck was carrying.

Victory Mahapanchayat in Mumbai

Meanwhile, on November 19, Narendra Modi was forced to announce the repeal of the three hated farm laws. This was a historic victory for the farmers' movement. The Mumbai Mahapanchayat, while celebrating this victory, resolved to continue the fight for a fair MSP, loan waiver, and other burning demands of the farmers of India. This was the last of the hundreds of mahapanchayats held across the country during the year-long farmers' struggle.

On November 28, 2021, this massive Maharashtra-wide *Kisan-Majdoor Mahapanchayat* was held at the Azad Maidan in Mumbai. That day marks the death anniversary of Mahatma Phule and also marked the completion of one year of this historic farmers' struggle. The Shaheed Kalash Yatra ended at the renowned Hutatma Chowk in Mumbai, which commemorates the 106 martyrs of the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement in the 1950s. The ashes of the martyrs were immersed in the Arabian Sea off the Gateway of India in a special programme, in the evening after the Mahapanchayat.

Tens of thousands of peasants, workers, agricultural labourers, women, youth, and students of all religions and castes from all over Maharashtra thronged this Mahapanchayat. It was organised by the SSKM, which comprises around 100 organisations. There were large contingents from the districts of Thane, Palghar, Nashik, Raigad, Ahmednagar, Dhule, Nandurbar, Jalgaon, and Mumbai itself.

On November 29, the day after this programme, the three anti-farmer, anti-people, and pro-corporate farm laws were repealed in the parliament. The Farm Laws Repeal Bill, as passed by the parliament, received presidential assent on December 1, 2021, and a crucial battle ended in victory for the farmers across the country.

In conclusion: a victory for democracy

The farmers celebrated this victory across the length and breadth of the country. This was a victory not only for the farmers but also for democracy. P. Sainath (2021), the veteran journalist who stood shoulder to shoulder with the farmers in this struggle, wrote:

And perhaps the most important thing the protesters have achieved is this: to inspire resistance in other spheres as well, to a government that simply throws its detractors into prison or otherwise hounds and harasses them. That freely arrests citizens, including journalists, under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and cracks down on independent media for “economic offences” . . . This isn’t just a win for the farmers. It’s a win for the battle for civil liberties and human rights. A win for Indian democracy.

Sainath also acknowledged the role of the farmers’ struggles in Maharashtra in shaping the all-India struggle against the draconian farm laws. He wrote, “Farmer protests have been on for a long time now. And particularly strongly since 2018, when the *Adivasi* farmers of Maharashtra electrified the nation with their astonishing 182-km march on foot from Nashik to Mumbai” (ibid).

Much before the bugle for the national protests sounded, the farmers’ struggles in Maharashtra had brought in discussion on many pertinent issues that the peasantry and poor of the state were facing due to the anti-agriculture and anti-poor policies of the state and national governments. These struggles compelled the state government to announce relief packages and make budgetary provisions for agriculture. When the nationwide protests began, the then ruling coalition in the state supported the protests and also announced policy measures for the protection and strengthening of the APMCs in the state. This was possible because of the massive support the national protests received from different parts of the state. These can be stated as examples of the policy-level change at the state level.

The consistency in farmers’ protests in Maharashtra had several distinctive features. It had many similarities with the national-level protests led by the SKM.

The state witnessed a broad-based coalition of organisations and groups that opposed the onslaught of the neoliberal policies of the Narendra Modi government. All such groups either came together or lent their support to the protesting farmers. This helped in shaping an anti-neoliberal policy narrative in the state.

The state also witnessed many spontaneous actions in support of the farmers' protests. Many local-level actions were organised in response to the calls given by the SKM. This in a way brought back the spontaneity and energy that were for quite some time missing from the anti-establishment mobilisations in the state.

The Maharashtra actions showed the strong coalition of the peasants and workers. Joint actions by farmers and workers were held on many occasions. The workers' organisations, trade unions, and their joint action platforms organised different programmes in support of the protesting farmers and, on many occasions, made the demand for the repeal of the farm laws a central point in their agitations.

Another important feature of the actions in Maharashtra was that they made the general public understand and think about the issues of the peasantry and agriculture. The actions in support of the national farmers' protests saw a rainbow alliance of agrarian, rural, and tribal people and tried to build bridges across classes and communities. Mobilisation and active participation of a large number of landless labourers, *Adivasis*, and women showed the possibility of building a strong resistance to the anti-agriculture, anti-rural poor policy paradigm.

Most importantly, the farmers' protests have opened new vistas for joint agitations. The national-level protests and the Maharashtra actions have cautiously kept "identity" issues at bay (Ranjan, 2021). The struggle at the national level and actions in Maharashtra directly identified and attacked the corrupt nexus of corporate communalism, between the BJP-RSS-led central government and the Indian and foreign corporate lobby. Through its three major demands, this historic class struggle of the peasantry, in fact, squarely attacked the neoliberal policies and imperialist dictates themselves (Dhawale, 2022).

The farmers' struggle and its victories should provide an inspirational template for the struggles ahead.

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Debanjan Roy

11 Loh *Langar* Tapde Rahen

Revolution and food in the farmers' movement

Sabah Siddiqui and Sarabjeet Dhody Natesan

The connection between farmers and food makes the *langar* (community meal) a perfect emblematic of the farmers' movement. Farmers have generational knowledge of the processes of producing, transporting, and storing the raw ingredients required for preparing food. In addition to the materials, they also have access to many of the raw ingredients, and they have access to the tools of transport: from tractors to trolleys to trucks to tankers. This familiarity helped sustain the year-long farmers' protest against the three farm bills on the borders of Delhi. It supported the prolonged political mobilisation not only by selflessly feeding the protesters but also by extending the concept of *langar* to include sleeping tents, warm clothes, shoes, socks, laundry services, newspapers, and medical facilities, channelling it into the central vision of sharing work and the philosophy of equitable distribution of resources.

The *langars* of the farmers' movement

We started rousing the people. We told them we are collecting money for that langar that was started 500 years back by Guru Nanak Dev ji with twenty rupees. If we do not start that langar again, we will lose our house and our land. So people gave us what they had, we collected what we could get, and then we left Punjab for Delhi.

—Sandeep Singh

Farmer unions in Punjab and Haryana had been agitating for a few months before the three farm laws were officially passed by the parliament on September 27, 2020 (Singh, 2022). Local protests had been ongoing since June when the laws had been introduced as ordinances, and there was hope that the government would listen to the appeals of the farmers before promulgating the bills. It was in the face of an obdurate government that in November 2020, the *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* (SKM) was created to lead the movement against the farm laws by bringing together hundreds of farmer organisations. The SKM declared that it would advance to Delhi on November 26 to make their voices heard in the political centre of the

country in what was called “*Dilli Chalo*” (march to Delhi)¹ (Bhattacharya, March 5, 2021). Once the clarion call from the farmers’ organisations for people to assemble at the borders of Delhi was sounded, the crowds there started increasing exponentially. The government stalled, refusing to discuss the three farm bills sneaked in as laws first by an ordinance and then rushed through the parliament by a hurried voice call. The bitter cold, the COVID-19 outbreak, the ripe unharvested fields, the absence from home, the lack of proper sleeping places, and the lack of access to clean water and toilet facilities, nothing could not persuade the farmers to leave their “*morchas*” and return home. Their demands remained steadfast – repeal the three black farm laws, introduce minimum support price (MSP) for 23 agricultural produce, and withdraw the proposed Electricity (Amendment) Bill 2020.

In Punjab, the protest call meant quickly rousing people to join the travel procession (*jatha*) and to travel south through the state of Haryana to reach Delhi. Contributions to the cause could take the form not only of physical participation but also of *dan* (donation) to a cause espoused by the *sangat*, and the Punjabi organisations were falling back on the entrenched Sikh traditions of *sewa* and *dan*. Having decided that they would stay in Delhi till their demands were met, they were preparing for a long negotiation, and part of those preparations was setting up *langars* to feed the protesters.

Gurdial Singh of Krantikari Kisan Union described the lead up to the encompassment of Delhi:

We (farmers’ organisations) knew almost a year before the laws were passed that a conflict was brewing. We knew we would have to come together and fight. Leaders of different organisations in Punjab spoke to each other, and the work started. We prepared the people in advance. We would go into different villages, create village-level committees, and explain to the people that the government was going to bring in a farm bill that could only do us harm. We had to rouse the people, so we would organize tractor march or “rail roko” agitations in the lead-up. When the time came, people were ready for action. Everyone, who left for Delhi, left with their own arrangements, every village had its own rations to last for two months.

It seemed that the farmers from Punjab set up their *pinds* (villages) in the outskirts of Delhi, joined almost immediately by farmers of Haryana and, soon after, the rest of India. Large quantities of milk, yoghurt, and condiments started to arrive at the protest sites from villages near and far. In addition to the food reinforcements coming from their villages, fields, and homes on tractors and trolleys, the farmers also started to grow food along the breaks in the national highways. In this way, life and revolution were sustained at the protest sites of the farmers’ movement, 2020–2021.

On November 19, 2021, the government announced the repeal of the three farm laws, which was acted upon in the parliament on November 29 (Prusty,

2021, November 29). Although the parliament had repealed the three farm laws in principle in November, the farmer leaders said that they would continue their protests till their other demands were met, and the SKM accepted the new terms set by the government on December 9. Within a day, the protest camps started dismantling. After the protests were called off, the protest camps were dismantled on December 13, 2021, as farmers made their way back home (Singh, 2022). What was apparent was the mass organisation of the farmers' movement, from the first moment when the *jathas* left for Delhi in November 2020 till the last moment when the protest sites were taken down in December 2021. This means the *langar* fires burnt for over a year, for 382 days, across all the seasons.

We documented the ways in which the *langars* of the farmers' movement were organised and sustained, by taking a narrative approach to the task of describing and elaborating on how the *langar* was set up, how protesters tended to the *langar* to keep it going, the challenges they met along the way, and the solutions they devised to tackle these obstacles. To collate this information, interviews were conducted by the first author with protesters in March and April 2022 in Punjab and Haryana, who travelled from Punjab through Haryana till Delhi to recreate some of the travel undertaken by the farmers at the start of the movement and then back at the end of it. Interviews were conducted in group settings, as any discussion on the topic of the three farm laws and the protests would draw more and more people in. The person being interviewed would invite their relatives, neighbours, and comrades into the conversation. In being mindful about the first author's language of choice as Hindi, most of the interviews were conducted in Hindi in both states. The frequent slippage into Punjabi or Haryanvi would be remedied by members of the group itself interjecting with translations, or at the prompt of the research team.² These interviews were later translated directly into English, and a narrative analysis of the interviews was carried out to explore how the very people who participated in the *langars* understood and spoke about their experience. The voice of the speakers has, therefore, been preserved within the chapter to record their experience of a year-long revolutionary *langar*.

Organising the langars

Supplementary to the will of the people ready to cook and serve food to fellow-protesters, the *langars* at the border camps required stoves, food ingredients, water, cooking vessels, and serving utensils. Punjabi farmers packed these resources in their tractors and trolleys in their first advent to the capital city. As soon as the *Dilli Chalo* call was sounded, different farmers' organisations and unions in Punjab assembled these resources at a day's notice. People who joined the *jatha* were usually members of the organisations but could include anyone else who was ready to leave. Similarly, those who donated the resources did not necessarily belong to an organisation or union, as the invocation of Guru's *langar* was enough to get the *sangat* moving, while

also bringing together Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. Farmers already had access to the large vehicles required for the transport of produce. These were loaded up, and the *jathas* left along the highways that lead from Punjab through Haryana to Delhi. However, since they never made it into Delhi, they laid camp on the borders in the soil of Haryana. The protest sites on the outskirts of Delhi saw the emergence of the most extensive camps, yet numerous camps proliferated and were diligently maintained along the highways, particularly at toll plazas and other significant locations along the route.

Fresh ingredients would arrive daily to the camps, sometimes by train or trolleys from Punjab, as well as from households from Haryana. The staple part of the diet in interviews appeared to be milk, which is also the one food source that spoils fastest. Thus, a great deal of planning was required for it. Sandeep Singh of the *Bhartiya Kisan Union* (BKU; Ekta Ugrahan) described the effort of his union at the village level as follows:

We organised at a local level. Say five villages became one unit . . . from every village we would decide that 100 litres of milk had to be collected, and so we would have 500 litres. These 500 litres had to be sent to Delhi, once in two days. We would collect milk from every house before 8am, everyone would give how much they could, someone would give a glass and someone would give us twenty litres. We also had an arrangement with dairy farms. Suppose we are leaving today for the camp, we would tell them to loan us 30–40 litres of milk and we will return it to you tomorrow when we collect daily ration tomorrow. There is a train that leaves Sangrur in the morning. We put the medicine [preservatives] in the milk so the milk does not spoil and send it off to the camps.

The political will of the Punjab farmers was met by the fellowship of the Haryana farmers, who, within a day of the arrival of the *jathas*, joined the camps with fresh stock to replace the depleting resources of the Punjab farmers, at least in water, milk, and fresh vegetables. After all, it was the same call of the SKM reflecting in their actions. Punjabi participants across organisations and villages have marvelled at how comrades from Haryana (*Haryana ke veer*) put out a river of milk to welcome them. Phool Singh of Akhil Bhartiya Kisan Sabha describes the meeting of the two states as the older brother (Punjab) meeting the younger brother (Haryana), and he said,

At the Jind Sugar Mill, after providing water and tea for a few days, we decided to run a full *langar*. We were not experienced in running a *langar*, since we had never done it before. However, our Punjabi comrades [*saathi*] told us that this *langar* will not stop, and so it happened. We met them on each step along the way. We decided we would not take any money from them and made our own preparations. People came here and ate to their fill. There are days when tens of thousands went through our camp.

The *langars* prepared the ground for the intermixing of communities that have become politically sundered. Nawab Ali of the Samajik Sadbhavna Manch spoke of the sharing of food of Muslim agitators while speaking of his memory of sharing food at Khatkar toll plaza after the prayers on Eid during the farmers' movement.

We learnt something important in the Farmers' Movement. This is not only India's longest agitation, but of the entire world. People united for this effort, with people from all communities (*biradiri*). Because farmers come from every community. We showed the world that Hindustan has such people who can raise their voice as one, and how we can share our food.

As the year progressed, collecting food rations and distributing cooked food became more streamlined. Raw materials were collected from villages all over Punjab and Haryana and transported to the camps to be prepared. In addition to the *langars* cooking fresh food in the camps, food would be cooked at home and transported to the camps to contribute to the *langar sewa*. Kapoor Singh, also of Akhil Bhartiya Kisan Sabha, spoke about how in the district-level organisation of the union the task of collecting milk would fall to the young men who would go for milk collection:

Milk would come from Khatkar, Dhankari, and other villages. Young men would go collect milk from house to house, and then store it in a freezer before transporting it to Tikri border. On the way, they would drop some off here [Jind Sugar Mill]. Big tankers of milk, and there was so much that would use the excess to make curd. There were days when we made both *kheer* and *halwa*.

Similarly, thousands of *rotis* would be prepared by women at their homes and transported to the border camps. Thus, the *langars* of the farmers' movements were supported by local families in Haryana, in addition to the work done by the Gurudwaras and the Punjabi farmers camping on the borders of Delhi.

Each organisation and camp kept their own account of cash donations they received, but several people confided that there is no account of the monetary value of the donations people made, in terms of food ingredients and cooking tools. Phool Singh was able to reveal that his camp at Jind alone received 35 lakh Indian rupees as cash donations, but that was vastly out-shadowed by the donations in kind that people made, amounting to more than a crore rupees, and the greater bulk of all this amount went to the *langar*. Thus, the financial support of the farmers' movement came from people, to a great extent locally but substantially from beyond. Several respondents have spoken about how the protests would have been rendered much more difficult without the support of non-residential Indians (NRIs), of fellow Indians from all parts of the country, and NGOs and organisations, such as Khalsa Aid. This funnelling of money towards the protest sites is a testimony to the national and international character of the farmers' movement.

Water is the most basic need

If food is essential for survival, water is life itself. The farmers' movement

Box 11.1: A day in the life of the protest camp

Sabah Siddiqui: Tell me about a day in the Bahadurgarh protest camp.

Sandeep Singh: There was a routine to our life in the camps. We would wake up at 4 am, and first make tea for everyone. Everyone would have tea. We need tea to start the day. Then people would attend to their personal needs and get fresh. For women we had constructed toilets for privacy. The men would find a spot in the fields around us.

I would first clean the area of the meeting ground to prepare the area for the farm leaders to gather. Then I would read the newspaper. *Punjab Tribune* would send us free newspapers. Newspaper *langar* of newspapers in Punjabi! People would queue up to get the newspaper. I would read the newspaper because when I had to make a speech at the stage, I had to know what to say, I had to increase my memory of things that were happening around us.

Then the *langar* preparation would start. People would get ready with the food, and also get ready. Men would tie their turbans. The men who don't tie turbans would also get ready, and change their clothes. We were preparing for a day at the stage. Every camp had its own stage; one or two stages where people would make speeches. A couple of people would be left behind in the tents and the rest would set out for the stage.

Around the stage, *langar* would be provided. Not only food and tea, but other *langars* too. There was a book *langar*, where I could sit and read about history or economics. I read about the World Trade Organization in a book there. It was important to read because we realised that we had to rule over the mind. To keep people here at the camps, we had to keep the mind engaged. There were our homes and families back in the village, but we should only go back to them when the three black laws were taken back. We kept people engaged in the speeches at the stage. We would make lists of people who were good speakers, we would keep a list of their names and how to contact them. We kept lists

of women from different villages, lists of young people below 40 years of age. We would have lists of people on duty at the stage, and then when we were released from stage duty, we would head back to the tents.

On the way, we would stop at a *langar* of our choice for lunch. There were so many *langars* run by different people. I remember the *langars* run by Muslims. You know that the government has much to say about Muslims. However, we made no difference between *langars* run by Hindus, Sikhs, or Muslims, be they SC [Scheduled Caste] or BC [Backward Caste]. We ate the food of the Muslim *langars*; they served sweet rice [zarda]. Then we would head back to our trolleys or tents. We would rest in the afternoon, after having tea. Yes, tea again! [laughs]

Having napped in the afternoon, we would get up and start the preparation for the evening *langar*. The women would make *rotis*, the men would chop and cook the vegetables. We would teach the younger folks on how to do this work. Women would clean the vessels after the men. Some would do their own cleaning up so as to not overburden others. We would have milk at night, if it was available. If our camp had no milk, we would find another camp that did, queuing up with our glass in hand. Then the loudspeaker announcements would come to tell us to stay vigilant at night. Some would be put on night duty so that a few people would stay awake every night till 4 am the next day. And a new day would start.

required massive amounts of water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, washing, and grooming. Without water, the protesters could not have sustained the camps or the *langars*. When not sourced locally, water was transported from hundreds of kilometres on a daily basis, sometimes in plastic bottles and tanks, and sometimes by tankers storing up to 50,000 litres. Jagjit Singh of Jamhoori Kisan Sabha narrates how they set off for the Delhi border:

We left on November 25, 2020, itself. Our *jatha* had packed dry rations for two months, cooked food, and a water tanker of 5000 litres. There were 2050 people in our *jatha* as we left for the Singhu border. Our *jatha* was the first to arrive. We had our water tanker, we would use it for cooking, and for cleaning up. Like this we managed 2–3 days. At first, we did not know the local people around us, and they did not know us. However, once we got to know each other, the fellowship [*bhaichara*] grew. They started supplying us with water.

After the incidents of protesters going up against Delhi police on January 26, 2021, the Delhi government and the Haryana government stopped the water supply to the protest camps for 7 days. It fell to the people to make arrangements, and donations from people from around the world flooded in to buy packaged water for the people occupying the protest sites. Many protest camps on borders also installed their own borewells and RO machines to ensure an independent supply of potable water.

Protest sites beyond border camps

The border camps were not the sole protest sites in the farmers' movement, albeit these were the largest and had the added attention of the news media. There were smaller protest camps set up all over the neighbouring states of Delhi. Toll plazas on the highways that ran to Delhi were taken over by protesters after the first call was announced on December 12, 2020 (*The Tribune*, December 12, 2020). The toll plazas were not allowed to charge toll in Haryana, followed by Punjab and Rajasthan. In March 2021, it was reported that the National Highways Authority of India suffered a toll revenue loss of Rs 814.4 crore till March 16 on account of the farmers' protest in the three states (PTI, March 22, 2021). The toll plazas were occupied by smaller groups of protesters who were on rotational duty between toll plazas and border camps. *Langars* would feed the protesters of smaller protest camps too, often transported from villages, Gurduwaras, and larger protest camp *langars*.

There is also the case of the 24-hour protest camp held outside the Adani Logistics Park in Kila Raipur. Called the Adani *Morcha*, this women-led protest barricaded the gates of the dry port taking up 88 acres of land from January 1, 2021, and concluded successfully in August 2021 when the Adani group filed a petition in the Punjab high court saying it will be shutting down operations at the Kila Raipur multi-modal logistics park after having incurred huge losses due to the *dharna* (Singh, August 18, 2021). Prof. Surinder Gill Jaipal of Janwadi Istri Sabha describes how the Adani *Morcha* started and grew:

It was a *pakka morcha* [24-hour sit-in protest]. The protestors volunteered to bring rations; someone got milk, someone got sugar. The protestors barricaded the gate of the dry port. As we started, people from the neighbouring villages started joining us. Especially women. The few women who came brought more women. We spoke to the women in the village about how harmful these laws and the corporates were for us, for women! Like that the numbers grew. At first, the women would stay in the day, and the men would stay at night. In April, we decided that the women will stay all night too. We were 10–12 women who would stay at night. Then go home and do housework. Women have worked very hard for this movement.

Being a small camp, rather than running a full *langar*, food would come from the Gurudwara in neighbouring villages for the Adani *Morcha* (as was the case with other smaller camps).

Gender and the kitchen

The Sikh *langar* has a history of being more gender-just, as both men and women can contribute to the cooking and serving of the community meal and be seated together to consume the food. Thus, historically Guru's *langar* has violated the gendered division of labour at least in the Gurudwara or during the religious sanction of the community meal, even if not inside the home and the division of household chores. This is not as common in the neighbouring states of Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh where the Sikh population is much lower. However, the farmers' movement witnessed women from all these states coming out of the private space of the home and joining the protest camps in the public,³ where their abilities to cook and clean were particularly significant. Their presence was both celebrated and supported, and their particular skills were deeply appreciated in keeping the *langars* going.

Nonetheless, there was a rough division of food-making in the *langars* of the farmers' movement too: more women were involved in roti-making and other cooking (including desserts), and men involved in chopping vegetables and sometimes cooking the vegetable curry (*sabzi*). Many *langars* served thousands of *rotis* every day for the duration of the camps, either in situ or at home and transported to the camps. This was usually the labour of the women participants of the movement. There was a moment in the interviews when roti-making as women's labour came up saliently. Jagjit Singh shared, "When we left for the first time, we took four cooks [*halwae*] from Kalanaur. Their payment was Rs 4000 per day, and we kept them there for three months. After that, we found roti-makers from the local areas. They were four women who made *phulke*. They would be paid Rs 1000 per day to make rotis three times a day. Put together, sometimes 2000 in a day, sometimes 1500". Women's labour in roti-making was compensated lower, especially in comparison to the male *halwae*. Nonetheless, there were many more women (and men) who performed this labour without payment at all, and out of their own volition and activism.

Nootan Prakash of Janwadi Mahila Samiti discusses joining the protests, especially in contributing to the *langar* and working side-by-side with men to do so:

When the *langar* was being set up, and it was just three-four days, we got the call that women should join the protest, and so three of us left immediately. There was just a small tent and some young men were kneading dough. They did not even know how to do it and were glad to see us. So we joined the effort of making the first *pooris* of the *langar*. In the next few days, we started going to villages and holding meetings to call the women to the camps. Many women came out of their homes for this. And the men joined in the cooking of the *langar* . . . the same men who did not even know how to cook at home were cutting vegetables and making rotis in the camps. We women were enjoying it so much, we would take videos. We felt that if the men learnt these skills, surely they would contribute to the household work of the women back in the village. It felt like the world was being made anew.

However, social change in the gendered division of labour takes more time. The entrenched gendered roles that relegate women to the kitchen/home and men to the highway/world were momentarily made fluid but will require more social transformation to have a lasting effect. This was borne by the fact that when asked if the men continued to cook and contribute to household work once the movement concluded and the protest camps were disbanded, the women in the group started laughing but could not agree, while the men stayed silent.

Cleaning up after the fact

It is to be expected that when hundreds of thousands of people occupy the highways and toll plazas in a democratic protest for more than a year, a huge amount of infrastructure is required to be constructed on the spot to support their living conditions. An important aspect of living in temporary housing was the provision of sanitary surroundings in and around the camps, especially since the amount of cooking involved a great deal of food waste and plastic waste coming from water bottles and serving-ware. Jagjit Singh described how cleaning up after the *langars* was performed in his camp:

Everybody who left from the village, each person took their own utensils: one plate, one glass, and a spoon. We would wash our own utensils at the camp. As for the cooking vessels, we put people on cleaning duty. It was a rotational duty. We had people from 15 villages in our camp. Each day it was the duty of one village to do the cooking, serving, and cleaning. Starting from morning tea to dinner. The food waste would be thrown into the forest. We would collect the waste in drums and carry them away from the camps and throw them there.

In conversation with student reporter, Soumya Thakur, we were alerted to the fact of the amount of plastic waste collection and disposal required in the camps. After all, even if each person had their own utensils, disposable serving-ware would be required for the thousands of people visiting *langars*. There is also the plastic waste resulting from the millions of bottles of water used up during the length of the protests. Thakur (2021) wrote about rag-pickers or waste-pickers who collected garbage from the protest camps to make a living. The protest camps were outside the area and jurisdiction of rural sanitation workers, and it fell to waste-pickers to step in to carry away the plastic waste that would have otherwise piled up in the camps. These waste-pickers make for an informal sanitation workforce and are usually undocumented migrant workers who collect junk items (*kabadi*) like plastic and paper. Thakur writes,

The lakhs of people filing in and out of the protest site have generated a lot of waste for ragpickers like Asmina and her nieces. So they go from *langar* to *langar*, filling large, towering sacks with recyclable waste, including plastic bottles, plastic boxes, thermocol plates, foil food wraps, cardboard, old papers and used notebooks. Some ragpickers

have switched from picking scraps to collecting plastic water bottles that they can sell at Rs 20 a kilogram. “I can make 600 to 800 rupees a day selling plastic bottles,” says Asmina. This amount is around three to four times more than what she made earlier.

Thakur (2021) mentions how the rag-pickers themselves ate at the *langars*, and one can sense the symbiotic relation between the protesters running the *langars* who fed those who came to the camp and the waste-pickers who cleaned in and around the camps, making it more habitable for all.

Eating food, popping pills

A 24-hour protest requires food, water, sanitation, and also inevitably medical care. Protesters would require pills for various sorts of health problems, and medical *langars* were run across the protest sites. In fact, the rise of minor ailments was compounded by the fact that protesters were living in makeshift camps without an adequate sewage system. As Gauravdeep Singh, founder of the NGO Initiators of Change, told us,

The issue was providing food on the road. With so much cooking, there is waste water, and the waste produced from vegetables. There was no sewage system, and the waste water started collecting around camps and becoming stagnant. It created new problems: mosquitos and stomach infections. If the area is not hygienic and the water used for cooking is not hygienic, it will create health issues.

Medical *langars* provided pills with no charge, with doctors and nurses volunteering in the medical camps to assist ailing protesters eating food that was causing minor health problems. In some cases, this was caused by food or water that was not stored or cooked in hygienic conditions, or that had gotten spoilt in the open camps, and in some cases was too rich for easy digestion. Sandeep Singh was able to throw light on the problem of the rich, oily food that so many *langars* were happy to dole out:

Everyone had their own way of thinking about the *langar* [*Langar me har ek insaan ka dimaag hota hain*]. Someone would run a *langar* of *jalebi*, others would run a *langar* of *pakoras*. But there was a downside to this. With oily food, people started falling ill. There was illness, and someone even had a heart attack. All that oily food is not how we eat at home. We had to keep the momentum going when people started falling ill. We would run announcements on loudspeakers to tell the people that they must eat well but also to eat according to an understanding of the needs of the body. We knew it was a long fight.

A preventive medical strategy was important in sustaining the protest camps in the face of the unexpected abundance of food, made more sumptuous by

Box 11.2: Medical langars of the farmers' movement

Sabah Siddiqui: What were the medical concerns for protesters in the farmers' movement?

Gauravdeep Singh: Other than food, the major requirements were medicines. The farmers grow crops, they know how to cook, and every village created their own structure for food provision. One thing they were in severe need of was medical aid. There were many people who were older in age: 60s, 70s, 80s. Every day they required a different kind of support, stomach infections, fevers, COVID-19. There were different and complex issues there. When we reached there, November 27, 2020, and the first thing I noticed that they actually needed medical aid. There had been stone pelting, water cannons, lathi charge, smoke bombs. Many people were injured, and many elderly people with injuries. We procured medical kits from Ludhiana and started distributing it trolley to trolley. Then we realised that they need more than medicines, someone who could instruct them on what to do. So, we ran a camp with doctors, paramedics and nurses. Live-care Foundation started a 24-hour medical facility with 12 beds and ECG and oxygen tanks. First, we paid for these services ourselves. But soon many people and organisations with medical training came forward and volunteered. At Tikri Border, there was Dr Swaiman Singh, a well-known face. There were local people who were ready to support us. People from Haryana and Delhi would send us medicines on a daily basis.

People were having gas infections. We would distribute ten thousand packets of Eno every day. And we were just one medical camp. There were ten others in the area. I must have distributed 2–2.5 lakh strips of Crocin over the year. People had to walk 2–4 km from camps to the stage. They would walk by foot in the heat. Some people would have headaches, fever, or pain in the joints. They were on painkillers, which we thought was not good for them. So we bought five e-rickshaws, and the e-rickshaws would transport people from camps to the stage. An organisation started a trolley that they called the

kisan metro. There was an inter-border kisan metro to take people between Singhu and Tikri.

The media called us terrorists, but when the second wave hit in the summer of 2021, we left for Delhi, where we served the COVID-afflicted. We would bring oxygen tanks from Ludhiana to distribute in Delhi. We would help with cremation because the number of people who were dying was in the hundreds every day. I worked in the cremation ground in Malviya Nagar. We came back to the border when things started settling in Delhi. The irony was that people were saying that COVID-19 was on the rise because of the crowds at the protest camps, but COVID-19 was in Delhi. There were very few cases of COVID-19 in the camps [during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic].

the fact that even with dark political clouds hovering on the horizon, hundreds of thousands of people had found each other in spontaneous solidarity.

The revolutionary spirit of the Sikh *langar*

There is an older history to the *langars*, a 500-year history: 500 years ago, a 19-year-old young man, Nanak Mal, was given by his father, Mehta Kalu, a princely sum of Rs 20 and directed to go to the nearest town and start a business. The father, a clerk with the town's government officer, asked his son to undertake a righteous trade, a *sacha sauda*. The meditative teenager met a band of hungry travellers and bought provisions with the money and set up a makeshift kitchen to cook and feed them. His father, livid, asked him to explain his conduct, and Nanak is said to have replied that he could not have found a trade more righteous than this. Many years later, at the age of 70, after completing his *Udasis* (travels) to propagate his idea of Sikhism as a casteless and idol-less religion, Nanak came to the village of Kartarpur on the west banks of River Ravi (present-day Pakistan). Here he ploughed and watered his fields himself, set up kitchens to feed his growing numbers of admirers, and spawned the last 18 years of his life. Today, Gurudwara Dera Baba Nanak stands there. Here, Nanak spread his simple philosophy of '*Keerat Karo, Naam Japo, Waand Chakho*' (Work, Meditate, Share). Here, Baba Nanak became Guru Nanak.⁴ His followers would come, work in the fields with him, help cook the meals together from the produce of the land, and, in the evening, congregate to sing hymns before partaking of the meal, sitting in neat rows, without any divisions of caste, gender, and social privilege. These community meals came to be known as the *langars*, to be eaten by the *sangat*

(congregation) sitting in rows (*pangat*). The *langars* were not sponsored by anyone; no king nor chieftain could direct any control over them. No one could break the *pangat*, and no one could ask to be served before another.

Thus, the *langar* is a part of the prehistory of Sikhism that has revolutionary origins of challenging the social hierarchy and has made right from the start the promise “of collective liberation (*Api tarahi sangati kul tarahi tin safal janamu jagi aia*), and went beyond singing about human equality to actually challenging the Hindu caste hierarchy (*Sabhana jia ika chhau*) by starting the *langar* (communal meal), which represented rejection of any social, age, or gender-related distinctions” (Mann, 2010, p. 10). The radical departure of the community meal from traditional Hindu society is emphasised by Sikh scholars repeatedly. Pashaura Singh writes, the *langar* “requires people of all castes and conditions to sit side by side in status-free rows – female next to male, socially high next to socially low, ritually pure next to ritually impure – and share the same food. This was the first practical expression of Guru Nanak’s spiritual mission to reform society. The institution of the *langar* promoted egalitarianism, community service, unity, and belonging while striking down a major aspect of the caste system” (Singh, 2016).

The formation of a protest

The protesters brought with them food stocks in the trolleys hitched to their tractors and were prepared to fight a battle of attrition. As soon as the tractors-trolleys were parked, the *langars* started instantly. They fed not only the farmers and their co-travellers but also the journalists, the hungry children, and adults from the areas where they had camped, and even the policemen on duty, ostensibly there to keep an eye on them. The strong link between *langars* and the agricultural fields sustained the protests for many Sikh participants. As soon as a Gurudwara was set up at the protest site (ANI, January 13, 2021), the sites became holy for the Sikhs, for they had been blessed with the presence of the Guru Granth. Maintaining the *langars* in the protest site became devotion and revolution at the same time, and *langar sewa* started in earnest. The meals were cooked together, served, and partaken by all, irrespective of their caste, creed, and privilege. The arrivals of the Gurudwara brought together the message of Nanak – work, meditate, and share.

In the freezing mornings of Delhi winters, and on some days after winter rains, women and men were finding it difficult to bathe before cooking the *langar* because of the lack of bathrooms and hot water. Yet, to their credit, they were waking up even earlier than usual, often at 3 am, to stand in long queues to finish their daily ablutions, waiting for close to two hours sometimes, and then going straight to the makeshift kitchens to start their *sewa* (service). Old men were also finding the going tough; the cold and lack of accessible toilets were a big issue for them too. Their presence at the *langar sewa* was important, so they were bathing at night or at odd hours, so as to be ready for the early morning kitchen work – all to adhere to the “*maryada*”

of the *langar*, which requires that it be made with clean hands. To get up at the crack of a cold winter dawn, to get the *langar* ready on time to feed people you don't even know, and to start cooking all over again, after finishing the first and the second and the third, unmindful of the fatigue and tired bodies, is indeed an act of devotion and commitment. Despite the challenges, they were all there, old, young, men, and women, unmoved and resolute.

In a modernised society that is forever looking for shortcuts, where warmed-up frozen wheat tortillas have replaced freshly made hot *rotis* in our city kitchens, to see people undertake the tedious job of kneading large amounts of flour into the dough, roll out a large number of *rotis*, and toss and bake them on hot *tawas* (griddle) over open wood fires that can singe the eyes was spectacular. From a society that can hardly be bothered to serve itself, to then observe the food being served respectfully to all those who have gathered to partake of the *langar* was inspirational, and even more so to see the vessels and utensils being washed up and readied for the next meal. The *langars* filled the stomachs of the agitating farmers, the police on duty, the many visitors out there to express their solidarity, and the poor and hungry of the areas where the protesters had stationed themselves. Hungry children, mothers, and unemployed men were all welcomed, requested to sit in rows, and served hot meals – served honourably to honour the food and the receiver. There was no cap on the numbers and no limit on the quantity one can eat. Everyone waited patiently for their turn to be served, with no visible fear and no palpable anxiety that the food would run out before their turn came. This is *Guru's Langar*; the fires burn and the vessels stay hot, for as long as it is required.

Food and revolution

In the farmer's movement, food and revolution came together. Nonetheless, food has always been political. Arjun Appadurai had theorised this everyday connection as gastro-political, as conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food (Appadurai, 1981). In his seminal paper, Appadurai analysed the semiotic system underlying food preparation and consumption in the Tamil Brahmin household, and in the minutiae of who serves food to whom, and who eats before another, he demonstrates that in the everyday practice of eating are several deeply coded meanings of place and position of those who cook, serve, and consume food. Appadurai thus looks at the semiotic virtuosity of food to bear social messages in two sources:

One is the fact that, unlike houses, pots, masks, or clothing, food is a constant need but a perishable good. The daily pressure to cook food (combined with the never-ending pressure to produce or acquire it) makes it well suited to bear the load of everyday social discourse. The second fundamental fact about food, although this is much less well understood, is its capacity to mobilize strong emotions.

(1981, p. 494)

The connection between food and social organisation has been generative for the fields of sociology and anthropology. Kelvin Low (2020) analysed the gastro-political implication in a more contemporary event from 2017 wherein an Indian politician rejected food made by a Dalit family (The News Minute, May 21, 2017), as the enduring political role of food preparation and consumption in upholding the Indian caste system. “Rules and practices surrounding food and the caste system in India are closely interlinked, where ritual and sensory boundaries of purity and impurity govern caste behaviour and the (non)acceptance of foods from another caste” (Low, 2020, pp. 196–197). Caste politics around food is fleshed out by Gopal Guru (2019), who serves the reader deep analyses of the sociology of food in Dalit societies, as he demonstrates that cooked food generates cultural hierarchies both across and within the social groups, which then can lead to conditions of humiliation. In a system of constrained choice, he makes us question the role of choice in preparing and consuming cooked food. Today, we see the overarching relevance of this question as India veers towards militant vegetarianism, an ironic consequence of Gandhi’s call to non-violence and vegetarianism at the start of the Indian nation-state. Kiranmayi Bhushi elaborates on how vegetarianism “invoked in a variety of guises – spiritual, ecological, sustainability, health, and traditional – in the public spaces with increasing frequency in contemporary India . . . often hides the real structures of power and domination and the vantage points of those who are at the helm of affairs” (2018, p. 12).

It is within this charged national context that the act of keeping the *langar* going for 382 days on the highways of Delhi gets its special significance. This chapter is a study of the revolutionary force inherent in *langars* today, especially if seen in its historical context, as a direct attack on the caste system in South Asia. At its very origin, the Sikh *langar* was an attempt to shake up the strong social hierarchies of India, even if only momentarily, while seated in the pangats of the *langar*. Here, it united the farmers to fight a good fight against an unjust system. The protesting farmers knew that food would sustain the protesters, and so food would need to be prepared and distributed among all who attended the protests, regardless of gender, class, caste, religion, or political affiliation. In the process, the very act of tending to the *langar* fires also produced an enduring legacy that connected the religious tradition of the Sikh *langar* to the contemporary mass mobilisation required to combat global capitalism. As Gauravdeep Singh opined, “People said that religion had no role to play, but the movement was led by Sikh principles of serving and sharing, the principles given to us by Guru Nanak that our Punjab farmers took to the borders of Delhi. Guru Nanak tells me to serve and Guru Gobind tells me to fight. So, I had to join the farmers’ movement.”

The secular disposition to deny or disparage the powerful hold of religious thought over bringing people together and joining them in fellowship needs to take another look at the historical moment of the farmers’ movement. It underscores the importance for mass movements rooted in socialist and leftist principles, aiming to foster social cohesion and drive societal transformation,

to grasp and assimilate culturally ingrained ideals and institutions. Such movements must recognise and incorporate historical examples where people have been united under the influence of religious ideologies or cultural movements. The farmers' movement had participants from beyond the Sikh Panth – in physical participation, financial contribution, and ideological support. However, the *langar* gave an easily accessible and culturally embedded anchor in preparing, serving, and consuming food (*langar*) together as a group (*sangat*). In this way, the *langars* of the farmers' movement stayed true to the idea of *sewa* and *langar* espoused by Guru Nanak, surviving 500 years of cultural and political transformation, and involved participants from outside the panth in the idea of community eating. The farmers' movement exemplifies this understanding, where in tandem with ideological and material support of lakhs of protesters, a shared sentiment of fellowship around food played a pivotal role in bringing various communities to the same table. It becomes evident that mass movements, particularly those leveraging the emotional resonance of cultural and religious sentiments, recognise the necessity of fostering a sense of unity among diverse groups. In the farmers' movement, one such popular sentiment was the indefatigable tending to the *langar* fires: *loh langar tapde rahen*.

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Notes

- 1 There was a media backlash on the farmers occupying the borders of Delhi as a public nuisance, with even charges of sedition and terrorism against the state. Nonetheless, the siege of Delhi in the farmers' movement was the democratic course of action, when the Delhi government barred the advancing protesters in their tractors and trolleys from entering. The harsh administrative response to block the protest with road barricades and pelting the protesters with smoke bombs, water cannons, and *lathi* charges added fat to the fire (Singh, 2022), as protesters felt doubly wronged when denied access to Delhi. New Delhi as the capital city of India and the home of the parliament is the natural space for the meeting of power and people, and has an unstopping circulation of protests within the city. In fact, there are designated spots, like Jantar Mantar, that provide the space for groups of protesters to set up camp, sometimes for just a few days and sometimes for months, and engage in the democratic process of sit-ins and sloganeering against the state to represent their special needs in the space of the public and under the eye of the nation. Denied space in the center, the farmers' movement occupied the borders.
- 2 The research team in Punjab consisted of Sabah Siddiqui, the first author, and Harman Deep, doctoral fellow at Plaksha University and then teaching fellow at Krea University.

- 3 See Jagmati Sangwan and Shamsher Singh (2022) for an in-depth analysis of women's participation in the farmers' movement.
- 4 For a brief exposition of Guru Nanak's life and work, see Gurinder Singh Mann (2018).

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Debanjan Roy

12 Women and songmaking in the anti-farm laws movement

A case study of the Badowal Toll Plaza in Haryana

Kopal

Introduction

The anti-farm laws farmers' movement 2020–2021 saw an extensive channelisation of a wide range of cultural practices in the service of claim-making as part of the protest. It harnessed the widest possible gamut of cultural expressions available to the participants in their lives in the forms of festivals, songs, dances, art, memorialising events, etc. (Bala, 2022; Sangwan & Singh, 2022; Sidana & Kaur, 2022; N. Singh, 2022). Music has been the mainstay of this cultural corpus. The Punjabi film and music industry had been at the forefront of the protest. The comparatively smaller Haryanvi music industry also joined in to an extent. But the extent of music- and poetry-making went much deeper and beyond what is represented by just the recorded music industry. There were massive levels of participation in music-making by non-professional ordinary masses (Sherwani & Dahiya, 2021). It is this kind of music-making by the non-expert ordinary masses, in particular rural women, that this chapter is interested in.

The chapter takes as its focus the processes of music-making at one particular toll plaza, the Badowal toll plaza in Haryana, during the anti-farm laws movement 2020–2021. I use the tools of ethnomusicology and social movement studies to approach the musical practice at the Badowal toll plaza as a case study.

Methodology

Music and other cultural performances have been an essential part of nearly all the protest sites including those in Haryana. This study focuses on Badowal for several reasons. Firstly, the cultural performances here were more prolific and were daily affairs, not just reserved for days of special mobilisations as at most other protest sites in Haryana. Secondly, it is situated in the most active region of the farmers' movement in Haryana. Thirdly, it has been one of the most well-run and organised protest sites in Haryana. And the fourth and most unique feature of this protest site was the unusual emergence of many women songmakers along with a greater level of general participation of women in the protest (S. Singh, 2022).

For information collection, several field trips were conducted to the Narwana district. The first field trip took place during the final phase of the anti-farm laws movement, with a visit to the Badowal toll plaza as part of a broader assessment of toll plazas in Haryana. Subsequent visits occurred in the following year when the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) organised a *dharna* (sit-in) in Narwana to address a charter of demands, prominently focused on obtaining compensation for cotton crop losses due to the pink bollworm (*gulabi sundi*). At the time of writing this chapter, the *dharna* had entered its 125th day. Additionally, three respondents were visited at their homes in their respective villages. The methods of data collection included observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions with key informants.

The theoretical framework is derived primarily from the fields of social movement studies and ethnomusicology. Within social movement studies, Eyerman and Jamison's (1998) argument that social movements are transformational moments in society with wide-ranging effects on people's lives and broader cultural and social patterns serves as the foundation for the arguments in this chapter. Another significant theoretical input from this field is Charles Tilly's repertoires of contention, which provides a lens for understanding the specific type of music-making observed in the field as an action repertoire (see Tilly, 2006).

Ethnomusicology provides a framework and tools to talk about both the people who are making these songs and the process of making these songs. Unlike discourse analysis or literary analysis, ethnomusicology allowed me to capture the fascinating transformation of people and public performance space along with the process through which this transformation happened.

This leads us to the particular kind of music-making witnessed at the toll plaza. Most, though not all, of the individuals I met and interviewed began making songs as a result of their participation in the anti-farm laws movement. The terms "songmakers" and "song making" are used here instead of "singer-musicians" or "lyricists/poets" because, for the most part, the participants fulfilled all these functions, and using any one or two of these terms does not adequately represent the range of their creative activities.

Songmakers and their points of entry into the mass movement

It is the foremost concern of this chapter to note the creation of a new repertoire of Haryanvi protest music at the Badowal toll plaza. The year-long protest at the toll plaza enabled the creation of new songmaking activists who took the task of creating musical repertoire and organising music activity. The creation of a new musical repertoire was a reflection of the newly expanded political identity of the farmer. In the context of working-class identity formulation through the assimilation of music from other protest cultures, Sumangala Damodaran has pointed out that, "The creation of newer political identities, for example, that of the 'working class,' have involved musical mixing and borrowing between cultures, apart from projecting music of one's own

cultures” (Damodaran, 2016). Approaching the connection between identity formation and music from this perspective proves to be quite valuable.

Who are these people who, when counted together, made hundreds of protest songs in the duration of one year of the farmers’ protest and continue to make songs till the writing of this chapter a year later? What were they doing before the protests? What are their class, caste, and gender locations, and how does it affect their music-making? The interest in the music-makers and their music-making practice is focalised through the lens of ethnomusicology.

The anti-farm laws movement was a mass movement with a broad base of class–caste alliances. Even though Jat men from small and middle peasantry were the majority and dominant section in the movement, there were Jat women farmers, non-Jat peasantry, agricultural labourers of Scheduled Castes, and people who were not farmers themselves but came from a rural background along with some others who joined not because of direct class interests but because of successful emotional and ideological appeal launched by the movement against the anti-people state policies. In fact, as it often happens in the broad-based mass movements, people join in for all kinds of reasons that may go beyond the stated demands of the movement (Miethe, 2009; Goodwin et al., 2001; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In this section, I will introduce the songmakers who were my primary interlocutors for this study and their points of entry into the movement and songmaking.

I find that the descriptions of the points of entry into a movement by the participants can serve as a ready guide to map out the link between the movement and the individual participant. In these descriptions, we can encounter the appeal of the movement for the individual where it resonates with their genuine needs and aspirations. At the same time, in some cases, these short biographical introductions also provide possible links with previous sources of well-being and sustenance of identity that are further strengthened and in turn strengthen the movement. I have used the self-reporting narratives of the informants and their own identification of their points of entry into the movement.

The first songmaker is Leelu Badanpur, a retired government employee from a rural background. In the beginning of the movement, Leelu cycled all over the protest sites – from Haryana to Delhi border sites. Initially he only participated as an onlooker. After the January 26 incident, when there was mass exodus of farmers from the Delhi border sites, Leelu was the only one left from his village. The next three days have been described as the loneliest and full of despair by many participants who remained at the border. Leelu, like many others, could not sleep, and he was so overcome with emotions that he wrote his first *ragni*. He had neither prior experience nor special interest in music or music-making. It was as if from the depths of despair only poetry could help him cope. He gave his *ragnis* to professional *ragni* singers who were performing at various protest sites, but failed to get them to sing his songs. It was after months of trying and failing to get others to sing what he wrote that he finally decided to sing himself. Till the time of the interview, he had written and sung 92 *ragni* specifically for the anti-farm laws movement, while the total tally of his *ragnis* stands near 150.

Jaipal Danoda is a singer and organiser who has been with the organised left since the 1990s. The left in Haryana was able to reach out to a large section of people in the early 1990s through the state-run adult literacy movement which saw teachers associated with the left mass organisations take projects to teach illiterate adults to read and write. It resulted in a vibrant cultural campaign through which new sections of people came into the fold of democratic movements led by the left. Several of the leaders and activists at the Badowal toll plaza have taught in the adult literacy movement, including Master Balbir and Master Chand. Jaipal Danoda joined the campaigns of the left in 1993 for the first time when he was 15 through the adult literacy programme in his village. He is the only correspondent who has not made new songs but brought with him a rich repertoire of older songs from the leftist farmers' struggles in the state. He is the most experienced singer and crucial in organising the men's team. He is in touch with people who are interested in music in the nearby areas, and they join him when time permits. Among the singer-songmakers, he is the only person who had a history of political work. Particularly songs from the anti-World Trade Organization movement from the 1990s are very relevant for the current protests and are part of Jaipal's repertoire. Songs by veteran songmakers of the left in Haryana like Comrade Basau Ram and Comrade Mangatram Shastri Zakhmi provide the sharp political framing at the protest. Jaipal Danoda is a Scheduled Caste and does odd jobs and manual labour for work. He has been singing in *Satsangs* just like his father before him. Even though he is the most experienced singer at the *dharna*, he has not been able to make it a paying profession.

There are about 15 women who emerged as songmakers in the movement at the Badowal toll plaza. Some of them are Pataso Badanpur, Bimla Badanpur, Santosh Sachakheda, Kamlesh Sachakheda, Seema Badowal, Anita Karamgarh, Bhateri Dhakal, and Neeta Frain. I interviewed Bhateri, Anita, Santosh, Kamlesh, and Seema in detail.

Bhateri, one of the senior women participants, started participating in the anti-farm laws movement right at the beginning of the year 2021.

Earlier I used to sing *shabad* of Babaji. I have taken the name of (formally initiated into) Radha Soami *Satsang* Beas. We used to go to his service and in his *sangat* (congregation), we used to sing songs there. During the lockdown, our *satsangs* were closed down. Then we got to know that there is a *dharna* in the Baddowala toll plaza. There were two of us who came (on foot), me and my *daurani* (younger sister in law). We saw that men were singing songs. We continued to go there and soon other women joined us. We were around 20 people. Initially the bus driver used to take the fare from us. Then, we started bickering and fighting and refused to pay the bus fare. Once, we stopped paying the fare, our group became of around 25 women. On the day our village had its turn to volunteer at the toll plaza, which was every Friday, we would come in the tractor trolley with the flour, vegetables, milk and dal.

Bhateri's husband expired 15 years ago. She does not have any children. Earlier she had devoted herself to bhakti, and now all her time and efforts are entirely "dedicated to serve the nation" (her words). The notions of service are very strong in many women activists, and they identify the political work of the Kisan Sabha and the farmers' movement as serving the nation. Bhateri's shift from singing in *satsangs* to singing in *sangathan* (organisation) is an important pattern that I encountered in the biographies of several women participants, and more would be said about this shift later in the chapter.

Kamlesh Sachakheda is one of the more prolific and popular songmakers. She is a daughter of Masaniakheda (village). Her father Jogiram was in Kisan Sabha (farmers' union), although she does not mention any influence of her father's being a Kisan Sabha member. She married into the Sachakheda village.

I am illiterate. It has been 32 years since I got married. I must have been 20 years old when I got married, who knows. I was not interested in singing earlier. I wouldn't even sing at Sanjhi (festival of a local deity Sanjhi). I knew all the songs but I did not know how to take the heli (lead) in singing. I did a lot of agricultural work all my life. I used to go to *Satsang* and dance a lot. Since last ten years I have been going to *Satsang* a lot. We have women's *kirtan* here in the village. Whenever there is a special occasion, anyone can organise a *kirtan*. So say my son got a job, I would invite all women to the *kirtan*. We keep a *murti* (idol of a deity), some fruits, give everyone tea and a biscuit. We begin with Ganesh *bhajan* and then sing Mata *bhajan*, hanuman *bhajan*, Ram *bhajan*, etc.

Nearly all the women songmakers strongly underplayed any associations with music and singing prior to the involvement in the farmers' movement. On further discussions, they would eventually explain that they had been active participants in local *bhajan/satsang* gatherings in the village but did not view singing there as music at all. The *satsang* that Kamlesh Sachakheda went to is of a different order than that of Bhateri. Bhateri's involvement was more engaged since she had formally taken the naam (pledged allegiance as a devotee) at the Dera Beas. The deras have a huge following of the marginalised identities in terms of caste and gender in North India, and their official discourse has some democratic content. In contrast, Kamlesh went to the *satsangs* in her own village with *bhajans* celebrating and worshipping mainstream Hindu pantheon.

Santosh Sachakheda is of around 60 years of age. She is one of the first women who started singing alone on the stage. She is also the only woman at Badawal who sang *ragni*, which is traditionally a masculine form. She is also the only woman who sang the form called *kali bharna*, which had men singing on the other side of the stage. Santosh has a deeply sensitive and observant nature. Her conversational language often slips into the poetic.

I was born in Bhadod. I am a pure illiterate. I was never really interested in songs or singing before this. Of course, I knew the *jakdis* (songs pertaining to the family relationships) and songs for festivals and ceremonies but before I never had (leisure) time in my life. There was so much work to do. I was the only one to work at my home here. There was no one else to cook. This was till I got my daughter in law. Before that there was not a moment of my own. We used to grow crops over 12–13 acres, kept 10–12 farm animals. I didn't know when afternoon came and when it became night. I earned and earned all my life through hard labour. It is only at the farmers' movement at the toll plaza that I got interested in getting out and made a few beautiful songs. Although it is only the people at the *dharna* who tell me that the songs are beautiful, I often do not like them much. I would work hard at making them all night and sing them a few times but later I would feel it is no good, do not sing it. If I was interested in *Ragni* earlier, I had excellent opportunity to learn from my father who was an artist. He knew many *kathas* (religious stories) as well as the Ramayana. But I was never interested. He made such beautiful *bhajans* that whoever heard them, men or women, they admired him. He used to sing long *kissas*. He travelled across 650 villages along with Maniram Bagadi. Now my daughter in law is here who works and I finally have time. So I went to the farmers' *dharna*. I enjoy going out to *Satsangs*. I love singing *bhajans* in gatherings, in *jaग्रatas* (a Hindu ritual consisting of an all-night vigil with singing and dancing, held in honour of a deity). I can play *khadtal*, *dafli*.

With a father who was an artist, it appears that Santosh imbibed the creative temperament, although she rues that she did not learn anything from her father when she could. Her father also travelled with the socialist leader Maniram Bagadi, which does provide a background of being familiar with an earlier tradition of democratic social movement for her. However, he left touring soon enough since he felt he could not leave a house full of women without protection.

The burden of household and farming chores along with animal husbandry is so disproportionately heavy on women that there is very little scope for leisure. In her important work on women *ragni* singers, Rani Tokas notes, "Thus, a routinised life woven around the household chores is the world view of women folk in the region. It leaves little scope for entertainment, leisure or learning to sing for women, except collective participation in life cycle rites and rituals; or in festivals and wedding processions and that too in spaces seen as ritually feminine" (Tocas, 2019, p. 1633).

Anita Karamgarh from the Karamgarh village is Bhateri's niece. Her mother encouraged her to come to the toll plaza and join the *dharna*. She was initially reluctant because no other women from her village used to come to the protest, but she finally joined on May 2 on the insistence of her mother. Anita had one prior experience of protesting on local farmers' issues before this. There was

an 11-day *dharna* regarding Dharodhi rajwaha minor, where Anita had first learnt to speak on the stage. She describes her participation thus:

This farmers' movement had a much bigger scale. I started coming from the 2nd of May, the day Mamata Banerjee joined as the Chief Minister (of West Bengal) and I used to see that all sisters used to sing here and felt the urge to try singing myself as well. First of all, I began with writing down someone else's song and tried singing that. Then I made three – four songs on my own. I made at most six songs not more than that. Apart from singing, I usually give speeches or tell chutkule (jokes).

Seema Badawal is another younger and educated woman who is now an important activist of the Kisan Sabha in the area. Her background and trajectory of participation are different from those of other women songmakers.

I am from Intel Khurd/Sisar in Jind district. I have passed class 12th exam. I have cleared the Prabhakar exam. By the time the letter came, the date for admission was over. Then, I was married along with my sister in Badawal. I was active in school especially in sports. Till class 8th I was a good Kabbadi player. After that for two years, I was the district level player in handball and badminton. In class eleventh, I had joined the football team. I have the certificates. In programs for 15th August or 26 January, I regularly participated. I was married in 2002. The toll plaza is in my village Badawal. I never used to go to the *dharna* initially. But I would follow through the news channel closely. After a month of commencement, I was coming back from the bazaar with my husband. I asked him to stop at the *dharna* for a bit. A comrade was speaking something on the stage. I said to my husband that this can be explained in a better way. He said that I should go and speak how I want to. It is easier to comment from the sidelines, he said. I said it is no big deal. I went and said what I wanted to. I was very comfortable on the stage. I spoke on the stage nearly every day after that. Since my parents as well as my husband are open minded and have given me space and opportunities to do what I liked. With time I started giving very good speeches.

Unlike the older and illiterate women songmakers, Seema's school education and exposure to both sports and extracurricular activities afforded by the institutional education system provided her the experience of participation in public space.

Democratisation of the performance space

Writing about women and professional singing in the public space, Tokas has noted that singing in public areas is considered unacceptable for women in Haryana due to the risk of bringing disgrace to the girl's family. Any attempt

by women to challenge these customs is met with strong, sometimes even aggressive, disapproval and consequences. Men primarily dominate public spaces, including professional domains such as the arts, performance, and sports (Tokas, 2019, p. 1633).

Prem Chowdhary, in her article on the rural male culture in North India, comments upon the normalised acceptance of gendered separateness in allocation of space in the rural North India, which “makes presence of males and absence of females natural” from exclusively male public spaces and leads to unequal “access to and control over resources of various kinds- material, sociocultural, political and ideological” (Chowdhry, 2014, p. 41). The unequal distribution of space and labour also translates into unequal access to leisure time and activities. As quoted in the earlier section, women find it very difficult to take out time for leisure from their incessant labour. This is one of the reasons that majority of women who became the mainstay of the anti-farm laws movement, not only in Haryana but also in Punjab, were from the middle aged to older population, who were able to participate in most cases after handing over the primary household responsibilities to their daughters-in-law.

Tokas elaborates upon the effect of this segregation on leisure. “Public space is predominantly occupied by men and this remains true even for the professional fields of arts, performance and sports. . . . Despite the vulnerable situation of women in Haryana, women from various castes (though mostly excluding the Jats who are the dominant caste) are now-a-days increasingly seen performing on the public stage” (Tokas, 2019, p. 1633). However, this entry of women into performance (of *ragni*) space has come on the conditions of its exclusive sexualisation into erotic singing, and hence, “women’s choice to sing on these platforms casts them away from the ideal frame of reference for womanhood in the region” (Tokas, 2019, p. 1637).

In this context, the Badawal toll plaza protest site acquires significance in its democratising of the performance space. It became a site where not only men and women shared audience as well as performance space but also different castes participated in the act of making and listening to the music together. Music and dance are activities that are traditionally looked down upon in the Jat community. In the later part of the 20th century, this attitude started to change marginally for the Jat men, and there are now Jat songmakers as well. However, it is still unusual to have singing and dancing in public spaces by the Jat women. Tokas notes that the “prevailing normative structures try to confine women to domestic spaces and discourage them from taking up singing as a profession. Within the dominating caste (Jats) ideas of honour and prestige act as severely debilitating factors for women to even harbour such dreams” (Tokas, 2019, p. 1634).

Organisation and structure of the *dharna* space

I would now like to briefly describe the *dharna* site spatially along with the structure of its day-to-day running. The venue of the *dharna* was the toll

plaza complex at Badowal. It was a large cemented open space on one side of the many lanes of the toll plaza. It had a flat tent roof erected on the top and durries spread on the floor. The stage was slightly raised and surrounded by people on three sides. People would congregate every day at 9 am and stay on till 3 pm. There would be speeches from the stage in that period interspersed with cultural programmes. There was water, tea, and dal roti for lunch. The men's team with musical instruments would be permanently stationed on one side of the stage. These instrumentalists would accompany both male and female singers on their instruments, which included the *Ghada*, the *Banjo*, *Khadtal*, the *Chimta*, and the *Sarangi*.

The Badowal toll plaza in Haryana stood out as a unique protest venue where women played integral roles in both decision-making and the day-to-day running of the protest *dharna*, fostering an inclusive and equal participation. One of the most important manners in which division of leadership opportunities was implemented was by deciding to give the responsibility of running the stage and the protest site to the women for three days a week. On these days, a women's committee would be in charge of the stage and would divide the tasks of noting the proceedings, deciding the line-up of speakers, making all the announcements, and collecting and recording the donations among themselves. Even though men and women both spoke and performed on all days, on "women's days" care was taken that more women were given the opportunity and encouraged to speak.

After 3 pm, the toll plaza committee members and other activists would move to mobilisation and collection drives to different villages, whereas the groups attending from the villages would reach back home by 4 pm when they would have their daily chores, particularly milking, waiting to be done.

The leadership of the toll plaza committee had a significant role to play in constructing the cultural intervention and subsequent transformation of people as well as culture. In a focus group discussion with the long-term members of the Kisan Sabha who were leading the struggle at the Badowal toll plaza, the activists shared that they had been trying to get women to participate in democratic movements for decades but had not succeeded. Since the anti-farm laws movement had received support from wide sections of the society, people in general wanted to participate in the protests. The Kisan Sabha at Badowal implemented several measures that encouraged women to participate in large numbers and make it their own space. The most important steps were including women in the core leadership and giving the charge of the *dharna* space to women for three days a week. It also involved actively inviting women to speak, sing, and participate in all capacities through encouraging words.

Another major decision taken by the toll plaza committee that had a fundamental impact on encouraging independent cultural activity at the toll plaza was to not pay any professional singer-musicians to perform. They welcomed everyone who wanted to perform but made it clear that the organising committee will not be able to pay the performers. However, the performers could keep the money that they get from the audience as inam

(reward). This meant that for day-to-day cultural performances, people at the toll plaza would have to develop their own ways of cultural engagement instead of being dependent on professional performers. Kamesh Sachakheda compares anti-farm laws protests to the Jat reservation movement where she and other women could go only as audience.

They did not allow women on the stage. I refused to go there after some time. Here, when Dimple or Ramchandar conducted the stage, they encouraged us so much no matter how we sang. They said even if you are illiterate, you are mighty fine (*bohhot chokas*). Master also would say that we are doing better than even the educated women. I make songs that are current. Now, the *Agniveer* scheme came, I immediately made a song. Whatever law Modi gets passed, I can make a song about it.

Seema Badowal felt that it was because the committee was led by retired teachers like Master Balbir who had been doing organisational and unionising work for many years that women could come forward. “The reason is that wise and pragmatic people were leading the committee who made sure the women were included in all activities and spaces including at the leadership level”.

Shift from participative to presentational

Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has introduced a useful way of thinking about music in terms of the social experience that it provides. Instead of looking at music as a unitary product, he divides it into four social fields based on the social experience and participation levels it engages in while making it: participatory performance, presentational performance, high fidelity recording, and studio audio art recording. This formulation is inspired from Bourdieu’s idea of social fields, whereby a domain of activity is framed by the purpose of the activity as well as values, power relations as well as types of capital used for it. Each of the four fields is differentiated by its own frame of interpretation, ethics, responsibilities, roles, practices, and distinct conceptions of what the activity is and is about. That is, each field is rooted in a particular mindset that influences music-making and reception (Turino, 2009, p. 97).

For this study, the first two, the participatory and the presentational performance, fields are relevant. Turnio uses the idea of participation in a specific sense, wherein it clearly contributes to “the sound and motion of a musical event through dancing, singing, clapping, and playing musical instruments when each of these activities is considered integral to the performance . . . In fully participatory occasions there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants” (Turino, 2009, p. 98).

The kind of music-related sociality that these women were engaged in before the farmers’ protests was primarily participatory. Both the religious

Satsang music and traditional folk songs that Haryanvi women sing are often sung in large groups where everyone present sings. The other features of the participatory framework are low threshold of skills needed to participate and the possibility to accommodate varied skills in the performance. This is what we see in the *Satsang* and folk singing performances where all women participate through singing and clapping but some women lead the chorus or start the new stanza and others follow, some take on playing the instruments, and some enthusiastic ones dance. This makes both these forms good examples of participatory music.

Presentational music field, on the other hand, would have one group of people making music for another group of people, that is artists performing for an audience within face-to-face situations. The primary features of presentational performances are that they are scripted, rehearsed, and tight. In an earlier section, we discussed how the Haryanvi public space and Haryanvi performance practice begin to get democratised with sharing of the space by both the genders. For the women songmakers, the change is far more fundamental in that even though the music forms they engage in mostly remain the same, the sociality of their participation in music performance changes drastically. They move from a participatory music-making framework to a presentational music-making framework.

I would like to share the accounts of the first time these women sang on the stage at the *dharna* site. Kamlesh Sachakheda talking about the first time she performed her song says:

For the first nine months I would go (to the *dharna*) and come back. When others would sing and play instruments and sing while standing up, I would wonder how they were able to do it. How are they able to stand up? Then I made a song. I told my friends on the *dharna*. My *sathan* (comrade/friend) Bhateri submitted my name to the committee. The stage secretary announced my name. I had no choice then. For 2 or 3 minutes, I just kept standing. I didn't know what to do or say. I was shivering on the first day but then I sang such a nice song right in the beginning. Everyone said where were you hiding this talent? Then, I started making songs. Master Ji came and told my husband, you had stopped her from singing so far. She sings like a bird.

Another songmaker, Santosh Sachakheda describes her debut thus:

It was the winter. I gave my name to the committee. I sang with great difficulty that day. Standing that day was tough like a mountain. It was not a song that I made. It was perhaps the only thing of my father's that I remembered. It was actually an old *ragni* from the Kissa of Jaani Chor. After that I started making short tappas that I would sing. It was so cold then. Dimple got my name written and made me go sing otherwise I would not have gone on my own for this. I don't know how I did it.

These fascinating accounts of their first-time singing at the *dharna* are important because they capture the momentous point when the major shift of taking on the presentational format takes place. The women are identifying the difficult experience of doing something new. While there are examples available world over of participative performances in protest spaces, here it is the protest space of the *dharna* that precipitates this shift to the presentational context. Since the *dharna* space is organised around a stage, it reoriented the performance from the participative mode to presentational mode. Even though there were group songs presented by women as well, most of the new songs were solo compositions. This was an obvious shift since the songs were being created individually.

Let us take a look at the process of composition of the songs by these women. Bhateri explains the process that is by and large used by all the other women too.

My first song was “*Yo Modi kade tae aaya, Yo pagal desh bana diya*”. I thought of the lyrics for this song while cooking at night. And I sang it at the toll plaza the next day. Initially I used to sing it while sitting. Then I started singing standing up. And once I started I made a song nearly every day and I would sing it the next day on the toll plaza. As I made the rotis, did the dishes, washed the clothes, ironed the clothes, I kept thinking about the words and made the songs. We did not learn it from anyone. We made no guru. We make the songs ourselves and put our *chhap* in our songs. I make songs in my home, Anita in her village, Sachakheda in her own village. Nobody tells us what to make. We make what we want and give our name to the committee the next day individually and sing.

The process of making the songs is by and large individual and solitary and deeply entrenched in the material rhythms of daily chores. The intellectual labour goes hand in hand with the physical labour. This creative and intellectual labour that is required in making songs gives a sense of accomplishment to the women making these songs. One could argue that this new found sense of identity as a music-maker is a result of the opportunities afforded by the presentational format. Efforts by women in making new songs at the *dharna* space are primarily individual and are acknowledged as such in the presentational format. This contributes towards identity formation.

Initially, when the women had started singing their own compositions at the toll plaza, they did not include their *chhap* in the songs. The *chhap* is the formulaic signature at the end of the composition. “Poets of India’s vernacular devotional and mystical traditions (commonly referred to as *bhakti*) generally use a signature line, or *chhap*, that identifies them near the end of the poem” (Hess, 2015). The literal meaning of *chhap* is stamp, and like a stamp, it serves the purpose of authorisation and both providing and proving identity.

It was once again Santosh Sachakheda who was the first to use the *chhap* in her compositions. Very soon others started writing songs with their *chhap*. This further works towards their identity formation as creative artists. Folk songs and most women's songs do not contain any *chhap*. *Bhajans* often do, but it is uncommon to have *Bhajans* composed by women.

This sense of authorship and authority is reflected in a couple of incidents of plagiarism that emerged around these songs. As these songs were uploaded on the YouTube and some of them became popular, some women in other tolls started singing the popular compositions by the women of Badawal toll plaza by replacing their *chhap* with their own names. This led to minor disputes, which were sorted out by requesting them to sing with the original *chhap* intact.

Taking help from Albert Lord's idea of oral formulaic compositions, Linda Hess described the composition of songs in the bhakti tradition. She writes, "On their own, the compositions may seem to have integrity as poems, but these variations and duplications of lines and passages in different contexts tell a different story. While some full poem texts can be passed along nearly intact for centuries (as evidenced by old manuscripts), the common unit in oral transmission is much shorter: half-lines, full lines, couplets, and themes held together by imagery" (Hess, 2015, p. 85).

The creative process of composing the songs by the women at Badawal is very similar to that explained by Hess. They have access to the repertoire of folk songs and *bhajans*, which they take as the base and then change the context to themes of the farmers' movement. Bhateri explains her approach to composing:

Some songs I made to the tune (*tarj*) of *chhathi* (songs to be sung on the sixth day of the birth of a baby), some on *shabad*, some on *gidda* (a folk dance), some on *mata bhajan*. We take the format from these songs and join our words for the movement. In favour of farmers and workers and against Modi and Khattar (Chief Minister of the state of Haryana).

But it is not only the tune but also the structure of the lyrics that is most often kept. Kamlesh Sachakheda explains her process of composition:

There is a song about Bhole ka *satsang*, it goes like "I will definitely go to the bhole ka *Satsang* (congregation around Lord Shiva)" in which the woman wants to participate in the *satsang* but everyone in her family is against her. The protesters were sitting in front of the hospital then. I made the song like this "*haspatal mhain andolan kisana ka, udae mannae bhi jana jaroor, mera susra jaan tae natae hai, meri sasoo karae support*" (There is a farmers' agitation at the Hospital, I have to join it. My father-in-law does not let me go, my mother-in-law is in my support). In the original song, the mother-in-law refused to allow her to

go to the *satsang*, but I changed it to support in my song. And I ended with telling my husband in the song that we would both go, *apaa donu jawange andolan mein*. That's how I made my song.

While the women used the readily available formats of songs to compose new songs, the new content and context of the farmers' movement and the political consciousness of class issues are learnt primarily through the speeches delivered at the *dharna* venue and to a lesser extent through YouTube videos reporting on the movement. Santosh Sachakheda gives an example.

I would listen to the speeches and add them to the tappas. One of them said in the speech how Mamata (Banerjee) destroyed (*choor choor*) Modi. I immediately added that to my lines. "*Mamata nae krya tera choor choor, tu kursi tae talae bagaya*". It was raining that day. She said Mamata nae karya tera choor choor. I turned it into a *kali* (quatrain) [laughs].

Kamlesh who is not literate and does not have access to YouTube would sometimes call Anita who has studied till the 12th standard, to discuss new developments that she would find difficult to understand. For instance, she called her to discuss the war on Ukraine. When she could not, these women at the toll plaza became an important resource and a support structure. While seasoned activists ensured the structural conditions for their participation were made available, most women found a lot of their strength and inspiration from other women. Women in leadership positions inspired other women to join and come on the stage. Each woman opened up the possibility for other women to take a step that was new to them. Anita Karamgarh brings to the fore this aspect when asked to describe what made her start composing songs:

I used to see that all the women used to sing here and felt the urge to try singing by myself as well. First of all, I began with writing down someone else's song and tried singing that. Then I made three – four songs on my own. Before the movement, we used to sing songs that we learnt from our grandmothers. We did sing songs in tune and well, but the consciousness of making songs and singing them on the protest site was a result of seeing other women do it.

To make the women's songs and singing adapt to the space of a front-facing stage has meant change in the dynamics of the performing body. Traditionally, both the *satsangs* and folk group songs are sung by women sitting in large groups. *Ragni* traditionally sung by men are sung standing. At Bad-owal, women shift from group to solo but also from singing while sitting to singing while standing. It was a major change in the form of the singing

body, and it came with trepidation and excitement. Bhateri points towards this shift in the following words:

Singing while sitting is very easy. There is nothing to it. When we sing in our village on any occasion or in *satsang*, we sing while sitting. You can make us sing as many songs as you like while sitting. There is a huge difference in singing while standing facing the audience, your legs tremble. Initially it was so difficult to do all this. There was no confidence. Even now if we are not active for 20–30 days, it is so difficult to start all over again. The blood pressure drops at the prospect of going on the stage. The initial few songs that I sang, I sang while sitting. Then I saw other women singing while standing, so I started too. We would stand together and put our face in veil. We do not show our face.

Entry of women in public space is never easy or effortless anywhere in the world. In the Haryanvi society, gendered division of space is still normalised. Women's entry in public space/male presence continues to be mediated through the veil to a great extent even today. This is especially true for the rural communities. The public space of the *dharna* sees some of these negotiations. Many women have stopped using the veil; many others continue with it with varied degrees of strictness.

Some women broke the veil symbolically on August 15 at the protest site. One of them commented, "I show my face now. When we have broken so many other limits, what of keeping the veil". Others have continued with observing the veil like Bhateri, who said,

I haven't. I feel shame. I live in the village. They would say that these women have broken the *ghoonghat* (veil). I am shy of that. Although there are many women who have opened their veil and that is fine. Our farmers here are supportive of this. They say open the purdah and sing and give speeches. I and Kamlesh do not feel like it. You can search our songs on Special Haryana on YouTube, you won't be able to see our faces. We do not show it. But you can listen to our songs.

Music in social movements and identity formation

It has been well established by scholars that cultural activities serve an important function of identity formation within social and political movements (Damodaran, 2016; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Payerhin, 2012; Staggenborg & Lang, 2007). The identity-framing function of the songs includes constructing a politically oppositional identity (by creating "us vs. them") and establishing class identity (through songs describing the struggles of a farmer's life and invoking pride in farmer/caste identity). For the women songmakers, identity formation happens even more fundamentally. It is for

the first time in the anti-farm laws movement that there was an emphasis on establishing women as farmers themselves and not just occupying the adjacent identity of women from farming households. This was consciously and systematically promoted from the SKM's leadership through speeches, pamphlets, and symbolic and ritual actions like instituting Mahila Kisan Diwas (Women Farmers' Day) and *mahila kisan* parliament (Sangwan & Singh, 2022). The women songmakers that I spoke to were very aware of this change in framing of their identity as *mahila kisan* (women farmers) and saw themselves as primary stakeholders in the movement.

Getting identified as singers-songmakers also has started to give these women an identity outside of the domestic space and independent of their husband/family. In fact, this is a major consequence of shifting the orientation of singing from participatory music-making to presentational music-making. The presentational format fosters individualisation of the talent. In a culture where women have a highly restricted scope of expression of individuality, the presentational format has provided the opportunity for significant personal transformations. Turino writes about the importance of art as self-presentation and a sign of identity (Turino, 2009, p. 106). These signs can have a broad range including clothing styles, hair styles, body decoration, walking, or dancing styles and can be used to highlight traditional group identity or individual identity based on how they are used.

Conclusion

The repertoire of Haryanvi protest music was enriched in the anti-farm laws protests, and songmakers at the Badowal toll plaza have an important contribution in it. Repertoire is a list of compositions that a group is prepared to perform at any given time. The choice for the performers to create the repertoire is from the cultural resources that they already have. In a mass movement, different groups come together with their own varied cultural resources and utilise them for the creation of protest songs. Particularly the entry of women into the protest space brought musical forms associated with women into the repertoire of farmers' movement.

Historian Charles Tilly deployed the concept of a repertoire from the performance studies to the field of social movement studies in order to explain the repetitive existence of set protest actions in collective performance of contentious claims. The repertoire of collective action, like its theatrical counterpart, implies a group of actors who choose among a restricted number of performances with which they are familiar. Their options are circumscribed both by prior experience and by the material, organisational, and conceptual resources they find readily at hand (Tilly quoted in Traugott, 1993, p. 309).

In this sense, amateur songmaking by ordinary participants itself becomes part of the collective action repertoire of the farmers' protest actions. Song-making is now a regular part of political action in all the following protest actions by the AIKS in Narwana tehsil.

Eyerman and Jamison interpreted social movements as “central moments in the reconstitution of culture. In the creative turmoil that is unleashed within social movements, modes of cultural action are redefined and given new meaning as sources of collective identity. For brief, intensive moments, the habitual behaviour and underlying values of society are thrown open for debate and reflection . . .” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998, p. 6). We have seen at Badowal this reconstruction of both politics and culture taking place.

In the crucible of the historical political action of the anti-farm laws movement, individuals and society both stand transformed. We discussed how the embodied performances of women transformed in their orientation, gesture, and posture; it is the transformation of individual selves that is most fascinating. In the focus group discussion, two of the women songmakers said:

After we won the struggle, we stayed at home for a week to finish the chores that we had put off due to the movement. But after that, we started the work again for the AIKS. We went village to village, did membership, made committees. We made committees in around 31–32 villages. We made around 5000 members. We get so much respect when we step outside the house. Our team is very disciplined.

Through songmaking, ordinary women have been able to give voice to their experiences and aspirations. This articulation inevitably takes the form of class and community concerns and in the process works towards reorganising the cultural hegemony. The act of coming together in a common space provides to sections of an unequal society opportunities to extend themselves in newer ways that they are not used to. Through songmaking the women songmakers of the Badowal toll plaza extended themselves in new directions, transforming into engaged citizens and political activists.

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Glossary

- Bhajan** *Bhajan* refers to any devotional song with a religious theme or spiritual ideas, specifically among Indian religions. It originates from the Sanskrit word *bhaj*, which means sharing.
- Chhap** *Chhap* is the formulaic authorial signature at the end of an oral composition.
- Dera** A *dera* is a type of socio-religious organisation in northern India. Jacob Copeman defines the *deras* as “monasteries or the extended residential sites of religious leaders; frequently just glossed as sect”.
- Dharna** A *dharna* is a non-violent sit-in protest, which may include a fast undertaken at the door of an offender, especially a debtor, in India as a means of obtaining compliance with a demand for justice, state response of criminal cases, or payment of a debt.
- Kirtan** A *kirtan* is a call-and-response style song or chant, set to music, wherein multiple singers recite or describe a legend, or express loving devotion to a deity, or discuss spiritual ideas. It is similar to a *bhajan* but more structured and formal.
- Ragni** *Ragni* is a Haryanvi folk form of musical narration of a “story or incidents” also known as “kissa”. It is traditionally dominated by men as performers, patrons, and audience.
- Satsang** *Satsang* literally means a “gathering of good people” usually for the performance of devotional activities. *Satsangs* are group events organised by various spiritual organisations.



Debanjan Roy

13 Reappropriation of space

Creation of temporary counter-space for protest at Tikri

Vaidehi Lavand, Onkar Khebudkar, Ninad Revatkar, and Ramiya Gopalkrishnan

Introduction

Delhi being the capital of India has always been a symbol of power and place to determine dissent in democracy. Open spaces and public squares like the Ramlila Maidan, near national memorial, have become accessible spaces that witnessed many such demonstrations in the past. These are visible spaces located next to landmark sites such as the Red Fort and Janpath Road, which is surrounded by significant government structures, central vista, and the India Gate (Sharma, 2020). This image of Delhi as a remarkable space for representation of the system, democracy, and people-centric government made way to farmers from various states to come together for a protest in the recent past. Farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh made an attempt to cross the border in large numbers to reach Jantar Mantar, the central and visible public protest site at Delhi. To avoid this insurgence, barricades were put up at all four borders, which prevented the farmers who travelled to these locations in tractors and trollies from entering the city. What was supposed to be a brief pause became an unforeseen long wait. These borders transformed into a place of revolt and protest as a counter-reaction to the opposition laid by the system to block the farmers from accessing the central protest site in Delhi. Putting barricades at the border became the trigger for the creation of counter-space, as said by Henri Lefebvre, and manifested into the conception of temporary settlements at the edge of the highways.

Protest sites have always imparted a sense of identity and space for expression for “we the people” of independent India. The dissent by farmers against the bill passed by the ruling government, and the borders of Delhi became a symbol of one of the most historic protests in the history of independent India. The four significant sites of protest, namely Singhu, Tikri, Ghazipur, and Shahjahanpur–Kheda, will be etched into India’s history as momentous protest sites for their impact and for the resultant protest architecture. The reason for this is the self-evolved and self-sustaining character of these spaces. For over a year, hundreds of thousands of farmers from all parts of India stood in solidarity with these protest sites. It was the

most organised attempt by the farmers to make sure their voices were heard at all levels right from digital platform, print media, to gathering support from others who joined the cause to form a loud roar against the farm laws. The temporary settlement created along the border, apart from built and unbuilt spaces, became a symbol of permanence and endurance on ground. Democratic voices tried to manifest in the patterns evolved on ground in the form of temporarily settled spaces (Sidana & Kaur, 2022). Dialectically, these temporal ephemeral spaces acted as permanent voices of the people. Delhi capital place and the central protest site represent the system, whereas creation of a protest site as a counter-space is a self-evolved site created by the protesters.

The prolonged wait was difficult to sustain in challenging weather conditions and with the need for basic services such as food, water, and lavatories which lead to a necessity of shelters. Later linear, scattered, and clustered settlement emerged as an outcome of this. These temporary settlements became a symbol of common collective consciousness, reclaiming public spaces, and acted as magnets of mobilisation and contestation during the protests.

Objectives and methodology of the study

The chapter attempts to locate and study the Tikri border protest site as temporary settlement from macro and micro levels to understand how the space was appropriated and utilised by the protesters. Using the space creation point of view, the chapter highlights patterns of clusters and their character and addresses the flexibility and porous nature of the settlement. To understand the protest site that emerged at the Tikri border from the point of reappropriation of spaces by the people, addressing its organic nature that led to the sustenance of the long-lasting protest in the changing climatic and unpredictable political conditions, the chapter aims to answer the following questions: what protest means? What is meant by public space within a democratic set-up? Which kind of temporary settlement evolved and sustained for so long on the Delhi border? In exploring the framework to understand space and its meaning in the case of the Tikri border, how did these settlements sustain so long and what are the underlying mechanisms that worked on site? How did the settlement at the Tikri border evolve organically, and what are the significant attributes that worked and did not work? Does the space creation also play an important role in its longer sustenance? What role does architecture and spaces, both built and unbuilt, play to cater to the protest?

The chapter also attempts to develop a framework of analysis between different public protest sites across the world and those that emerged during the anti-farm law protests in India.

Furthermore, it tries to relook at the theory of production of space and ephemeral urbanism in the case of the Tikri protest site. A study at the macro

level and individual clusters at the micro level for the Tikri border stretch are discussed elaborately.

The research uses primary and secondary data obtained from interviews, newspaper articles, Internet, and mapping of the Tikri border protest site using Google Earth images. Mapping and visual analysis are done on the basis of reconnaissance survey and authors' visit to the protest site. Temporary shelters and settlement pattern at the Tikri border are discussed with the help of data gathered through preliminary surveys and on-site observations, sketches, photographic documentation, and secondary sources such as literature and visual appraisal. Sketches and conjectural maps helped in detailed mapping and space analysis, and interviews of the protesters and contributing actors helped in understanding the support mechanism and infrastructure developed on the protest site.

Data collection and analysis

Creation of public space and its significance

Right to dissent is related to the space you get to express; importantly, in a democratic set-up, the question of public space is significant to address. According to Don Mitchell, public spaces can be defined at three levels. The first type is parks and places open to the public, whereas the second is plazas or open spaces in front of public buildings. The third form includes all other public properties (Lefebvre, 1992; Mitchell, 2003). Public space is considered to be open, free, accessible to all, and financed by the public money for the people. These spaces are the outcome of people-oriented planning and catering to the sense of belongingness to the mass. Common people decide how the public space should be used and what it should represent as an inevitable part of democracy. "It is a space of freedom of movement, expression, and most importantly, it is our first contact with a city". Public space usually reflects the policies of the government towards the people of their country (Harrouk, 2020).

While leading to Delhi, farmers had never thought of using highways as their sheltering place. Roads usually used for vehicular traffic and the edge of a town or village were appropriated as places of shelters. Thousands of farmers occupied the entire stretch of 22 km. Self-selected plots and social and cultural appropriateness of design are evident at many corners of the stretch. Just beyond aesthetics, politics of a space as dialectics between possible and impossible can also be looked into as the process of evolution of temporal settlement at the Tikri protest site. Production of new spaces and reappropriation of space as discussed by Henri Lefebvre take us to another level of understanding in this context. Change of usage of a space beyond its established language and catering to the collective actors within a space could be exercised in case of the protest site at the Tikri border. Temporary settlements have its inbuilt character of human scale, flexibility, transparency, access, and porosity. This offers the mass a sense of belonging and collectiveness.

To understand different hierarchies and typologies of spaces created, terms like absolute space, abstract space, G, P, and M are exemplified by Lefebvre which could be interpreted in the case of the Tikri border settlement where space has been explored with multiple use and flexibility. G (for “global”) represents landmark places such as palaces by Lefebvre, but in case of protest sites, stage, libraries, and medical camps were the landmarks in the settlement. P represents the level of residence, that is whether those shelters are in linear, scattered, or cluster pattern, and M can be intermediate spaces such as small open spaces as activity area with flexible usage and transitional areas between the clusters having a very porous and transparent character, enhancing the sense of collectiveness and connectedness.

Contextualising study with other protest sites

There is a long history to protests, and landmark sites are remembered as spaces of public revolt against the system in all parts of the world. Public spaces have also been defined as a powerful tool by scholars at various places, especially revolts, protests, and demonstrations that took place in the past decades in west Asian countries/Arab countries and the United States, to name a few. These spaces helped showcase the power and mark the presence of common people. Their visibility in public space in the form of protests had exemplified how organised protests, collective efforts, and voices extended at public spaces can be effective and portrays protests as the most powerful political tool for change. Addressing protest sites in a public realm and defining its importance are well-explained in the article by Majdi Faleh, who suggests that “the public square should not be represented as the city’s gated property or as a walled garden. It should be a space that provides citizens with opportunities to engage in political and social debates” (Harrouk, 2020). Protest sites are tangible and intangible manifestations of the individual and the collective identities. Location, borders, views, scale, proportions, landmarks, and edges play a vital role in determining the impact of these sites. They have the potential to pause the passerby and the citizens, imposing their presence and potentially imbibing the power of dissent. Martyrs’ Square at Beirut reclaiming its streets; Plaza de la República; México City, which witnessed the Wall Street movement; Times Square, New York, USA; Tahrir Square, Cairo; and Place de la Republique, Paris, France, are all important examples that has showcased the power of dissent in the past (Rabbat, 2012).

Apart from strategic locations and visibility aspects of protest sites, there are many layers and mechanisms that work as invisible support systems from behind for all the visible demonstrations on site. The Tahrir Square revolt was a successful demonstration that impacted the system. This happened with the appropriate support the protesters received from the adjacent neighbourhoods. The extremely crowded locality became a major supporting element

during the revolution (Trombetta, 2013; Winegar, 2016). Collective actions of common people from various layers beyond a particular political group gave way to a social movement at Tahrir Square. Urban spatial politics and collective action in revolutionary Cairo acted as counter-spaces for the people. The adjacent neighbourhoods played an important role in supporting the mobilisation. A series of political performances along with the performances of space led to the involvement of the mass in the revolution (Dikec, 2012; Gregory, 2013; Ismail, 2022). Egypt's capital Cairo has the highest density in the world, which is 153,606/km² (2018). With a population of over 100 million, around 60% of the total population stay in the informal settlements around the old city of Cairo, which are legally called as slums by the Egyptian government. Years of military dictatorship in the country overlooked the city's growing population, leading to overcrowding and extreme living conditions of the citizens of Cairo. Interestingly, over the span of six decades, eight new desert cities were planned around greater Cairo to improve the conditions. But all these cities were planned only for the higher income groups, thus ignoring the unplanned and extremely overcrowded suburbs of greater Cairo. This ultimately resulted in the 2011 protest at the epicentre of the city – Tahrir Square, which is located in a locale that has important administrative buildings including the parliament. The protest started with people demanding freedom from the military regime. The 18-day-long protest paralysed the functioning of the government and eventually led to the fall of former President Hosni Mubarak. The protest resulted in mass clashes and violence, causing injuries to more than 1,000 people, as declared by the Egyptian health ministry. These protests resulted in the fall of the 20-year-old military regime of President Mubarak and further led to organising the nation's first democratic elections.

The newly elected president, Mohamed Mohamed Morsi, ruled only for a year and was overthrown from office by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in a coup d'état in June 2013. The Tahrir Square event led to the new regime learning from the earlier uprising.

The government has announced plans to relocate the new administrative capital to a new place that is 45 km away from the centre of Cairo. The new capital will not only have the parliament and presidents' buildings, but it will also hold all the administrative ministry buildings along with the new housing areas, central business districts (CBDs) and international-level sports complexes. Ironically, they will also be constructing a public piazza in the new capital. Meanwhile, they have made significant changes in the Tahrir Square by erecting a huge monument in the centre and adding many military check posts in the adjoining edges of the square to curtail any probability of any future protests. Additionally, bridges were constructed and roads were expanded in the dense core city areas to increase accessibility for military during civil unrest. These urban planning measures resemble the counter-measures adopted by the British in many of its administrative capitals after the revolt of 1857 in British India.

While understanding space through various social phenomena, class struggle and space as a social product are other interesting discourses that may be looked at. Henri Lefebvre poses different takes on the various paradigms of understanding space from the sociological phenomenon beyond the aesthetic one. He mentions “Class struggle, its role in the production of space is a cardinal one in that this production is performed solely by classes, fractions of classes and groups representative of classes”, and “(Social) space is a (social) product”. This is an important discussion that opens up different interpretations in the way the process of production could be understood. “Space as social (Socially produced space)” not mathematical empty space is a statement that could be taken ahead in this discussion to analyse the spaces created by protesters at Delhi borders.

As said by Gramsci, space gives the notion of hegemony. This protest site could be observed as a process of counter-reaction to the hegemony. These sites are exemplary in exhibiting the bottom-to-top approach, where counter-space is a product created in the process of questioning the hegemony of the government. Every society and every mode of production generate its own space in its own unique way as a reflection of successful mass movement (Lefebvre, 1992).

Protesters reached Tikri and Singhu borders as they desired access to Jantar Mantar, a public space for protest. They were stopped from entering Delhi, which eventually turned these borders into halting spaces (Singh, 2022). Identity, location significance, and visibility of site were the main concerns that led their decision to protest at the central location in Delhi. But hurdles created by the system led to reappropriation of the highway space into temporary settlements, leading to the creation of counter-spaces by the farmers.

Streets where protesters were stopped were transformed into usable and livable space. This cannot be seen as a randomly evolved settlement, but it is a collective attempt of the farmers and protesters to stand firm with what they believed. Their attempt to influence the system for change was stopped, which led to the creation of these spaces as a response to the opposition created by the government.

A population ranging between 1 lakh and 2 lakhs stayed in these temporary clusters of shelters built along the highway. The number of tractors and trolleys on the Tikri border alone was somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000. The approximate number of farmers at this site was between two lakhs and three lakhs, excluding the constant flow of those who came from neighbouring villages during the day and returned in the evening, as well as people from other parts of the country who visited and met these farmers to show their support and solidarity (Singh, 2020).

Reappropriation of space

In the process of place-making, a space inherently becomes inhabitable and livable. Temporary settlements along the borders are those livable spaces that

became examples of cities within cities, as said by Jyoti Hosagrahar (2011). When it comes to social space and science of space, there are paradigms and specific usage that give them meaning and syntax. These, as explained by Lefebvre, govern their organisation. Representations of space have a substantial role and a specific influence in the production of space that is evident in the case of protest sites around Delhi borders (Lefebvre, 1991). The temporal character of architecture, settlement patterns, language of elements and space uses, and texture of place are probably some of the important tangible elements of temporary settlements created by the farmers at the protest site to cater to their basic needs.

Two typologies of colonial theories are analysed: some from the perspective of the British's domination and control, and a few focusing on Indians' perspective of appropriation of various public spaces and buildings. As mentioned by Veena Talwar Oldenburg, the British made drastic morphological changes in the core cities of Lucknow and Delhi as a response to the Great Revolt of 1857. This resulted in the creation of wider esplanades in place of old intricate streets of the core city. These planning strategies were to assure the sense of control and to avoid resistance (Oldenburg, 2016). On the other hand, postcolonial theorist Dr. Prashant Kidambi explains about the reappropriation of public spaces designed for British elites by Indian nationalists during the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930. The Satyagraha Committee renamed the Esplanade Maidan in South Bombay, a symbolic political centre of British establishment, as Azad Maidan, meaning Freedom Park, to exercise a non-violent protest site (Kidambi, 2012).

In case of the Tikri protest site, this creation of counter-space was accidental to some extent at the beginning, which led to random positions and scattered locations for the temporary shelters. This was beyond any caste and class hierarchy that is prominently evident in the countryside.

The settlement pattern emerged at the edge of the highways. This chapter aims to understand how the Tikri protest site and people's participation in the actual construction of temporary shelters defined rather triggered the overall pattern of settlement. It tries to explain how people's architecture with a collective cause could be expressed in such a vibrant space. Overall, spatial organisation in the settlement pattern and flexible temporal spaces can be utilised as shelters for a longer period of time, enduring or sustaining the protest. Making an inventory of spaces and elaborating the observations based on the spatial expression of the settlement is the first step, and the second is to try and ascertain what paradigm gives them their meaning, what syntax actually governed their organisation as a support mechanism to sustain this for such a long period of time. It is significant to take under consideration the support mechanism, infrastructure amenities, and *langar* system that catered to the long-term protests in all climate conditions.

This temporary settlement by the farmers at the Tikri border could be decoded at three levels: the first is understanding the character of the patterns from the macro level, the second is understanding at the cluster or micro

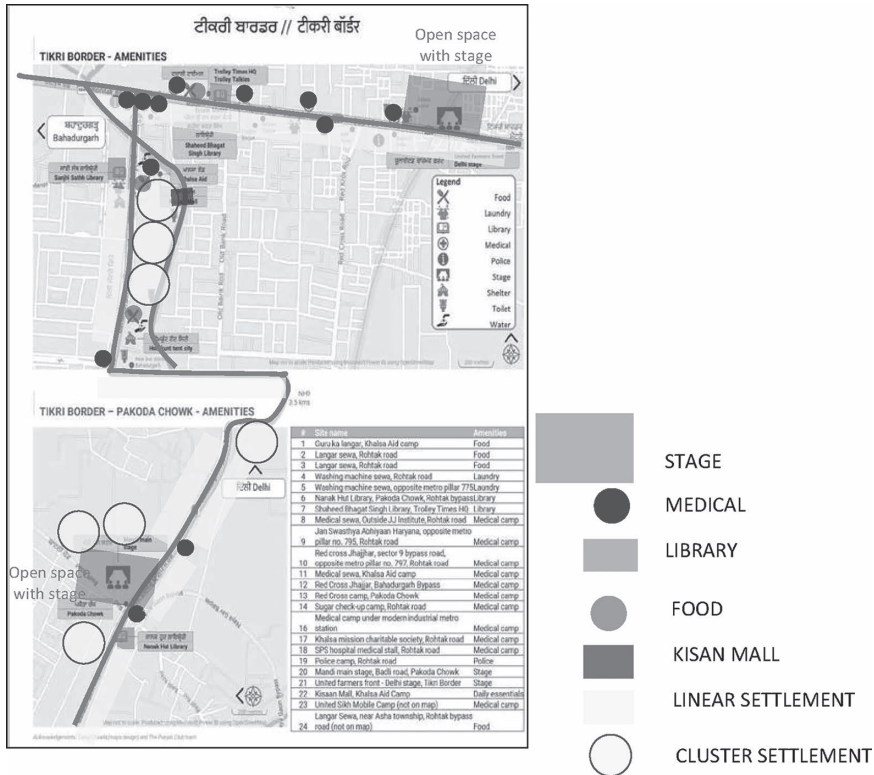


Figure 13.1 Chawla, 2021 Image of Amenities and Infrastructure at the Tikri Border Protest Site.

level, and the third is understanding its impact at a larger platform in the history of protests and history of large temporary settlements created and taken away with a collective cause/consciousness.

As published in *Trolley Times*, amenities shown on maps helped protesters during the entire protest. Facilities such as Khalsa Aid camps providing food to protesters, laundry services named as Washing Machine Sewa at two points, daily essentials, and police camp; Nanak hut library; and Shaheed Bhagat Singh Library came up as part of the *langar*, a tradition of Punjab and Haryana of giving services to people in large numbers. Medical camps at 11 points assisting protesters of all age groups and gender were flooded with aids, and doctor were available at all times. Haryana Janswastha Abhiyan played a major role in taking care of medical services at the Tikri border (Chawla, 2021). This accessibility and transparency made these protest sites and temporary settlements a public space in the course of the movement and made the site approachable to ordinary people (Sidana & Kaur, 2022).

Hierarchy of open spaces at the cluster level with two large open spaces and stage at both the ends of the entire stretch helped in binding the movement together. Regular discussions at small clusters happened day and night, bringing people together. The two stages acted as magnets for cultural catering to the protest and keeping the spirit of collectiveness alive. These two stages and the large open space adjacent to them acted as the cultural hub where all the meetings and discussions addressing the large crowd happened.

Ephemeral urbanism and temporarily “settled places”

There are many examples of ephemeral urbanism as exemplified by Khanna and Macomber in case of the urban context through the example of Kumbh Mela at Banaras (Khanna & Macomber, 2015). This study mainly focuses on economics and religion as the centre of discourse. In case of the Tikri border site, its evolution demarcates its existence as a collective effort for a cause.

Significant work on temporary, mobile, and flexible spaces from the aesthetic point of view could be seen on ephemeral urbanism in the context of Kumbh Mela. They speak about a temporary settlement occurring at Allahabad every 12 years. The authors articulate the visual and functional mechanism of this temporal settlement: how the implementation of tents is done only using few materials and how the local authorities fulfil all infrastructural requirements for the same. Later aesthetics and vibrancy of these mobile temporal spaces are discussed, mentioning no traces of it left at the end with no memory (Khanna & Macomber, 2015). But in case of the protest sites in public spaces, although temporal in character, these spaces have a larger impact on the memories with them being people’s places not meant for any religious demonstration but for the people’s rights. Farmers, in some cases, preserved and took back the dwellings they lived in after the protests were called off. Self-selection of plot and social and cultural appropriateness of design are quite evident at the Tikri border (Rybczynski & McGill University Minimum Cost Housing Group, 1984).

Settlement patterns and temporary shelters

For the settlement at macro and micro levels, authors used their experience of site at the Tikri border, and other resources such as interviews, literature, and secondary data helped in the further investigation.

Settlement studies usually follow certain principles and elements in documentation. Origin of settlement, context, climate, settlement pattern, detailed study of clusters, their linkages, and vernacular architecture are studied in detail (Rybczynski & McGill University Minimum Cost Housing Group, 1984). In order to understand its evolution pattern, one needs to look at the geography, people, culture, hierarchy of spaces, and language of architecture that define the settlement. This further helps one understand how the settlement responds to the context (Shankar, 2014). In case of the settlement at the

protest site of the Tikri border, a different approach from the conventional one may help articulate the space dynamics and support mechanism better.

At the Tikri border, the spaces at the centre of the highway and adjacent to the farmlands were selected to settle during the course of the protest. Spaces next to the farmlands facilitated in the creation of cluster settlement, whereas the edge of the roadway led to linear settlement.

Various typologies of temporary shelters came up within a month to strengthen the protest. Those were as below:

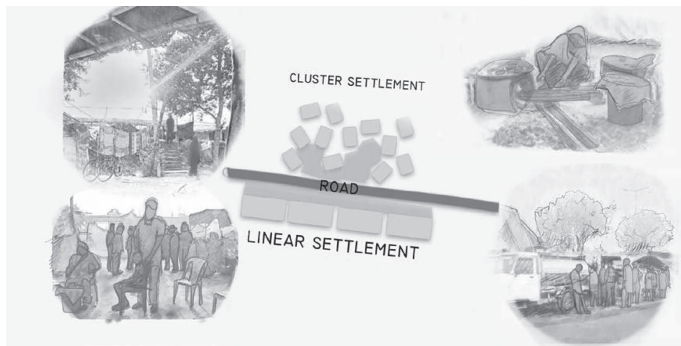
1. Shelters in trollies in a linear pattern below the bridge near the barricades
2. Separately built scattered temporary shelters using various materials responding to climate conditions
3. Clusters besides farmlands near the highway
4. Linearly built along the roadside
5. Built below the flyover
6. Pakka or permanent houses (transformation from huts to makans)

Visual analysis and understanding spatial organisation at the cluster level

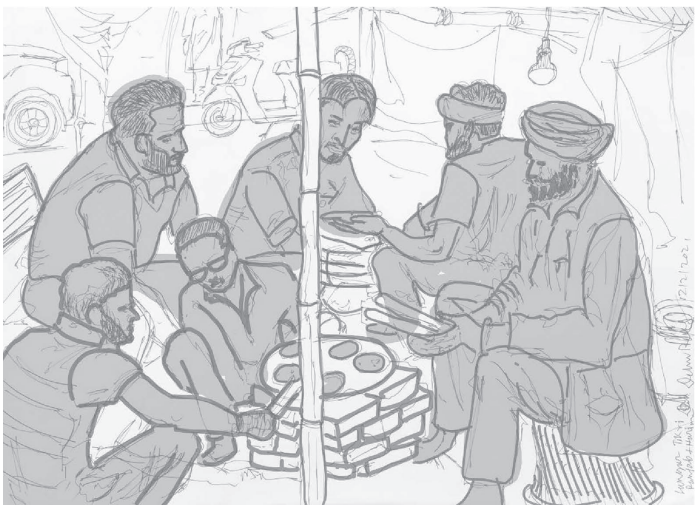
Based on the reconnaissance survey, primary and secondary data, it is observed that the process of building shelters, which was initiated by protesting farmers, eventually turned into a more participatory design. More interaction among the people, visibility and sharing, and collective suffering all got incorporated in the organisation of spaces. Whether linear or cluster or scattered settlements, all had a common character in terms of flexibility as patterns evolved. Hierarchy of both open and closed spaces was observed in all the clusters. Spaces for social and cultural interaction at both the cluster and the settlement level assisted in the movement of residing protesters, as well as the visitors. Both the stages that had the capacity of accommodating more than a thousand people at a time were covered with temporary shade. It catered to protest and big cultural events, demonstrations, and public talks, whereas open spaces at the cluster level helped in smaller gatherings and other common activities.

Activities at the cluster level

Open spaces at the cluster level catered to many activities such as group discussions, common cooking area, and space for having food. Open spaces along the highway were converted into courts for volleyball, badminton, wrestling, and kabaddi, with some competitions in which national and international players participated. Together the residents of the protest sites weathered storms that blew away tents. Libraries with books on literature, poetry, politics, and the social sciences acted as magnets for discussions and exchange of knowledge. Researchers talked about the Tikri border site as reclaiming public spaces and collective consciousness.



Figures 13.2 Sketches Demonstrating the Porous, Flexible, and Transparent Nature of the Settlement and Shelters, based on images by Vaidehi Lavand.



Figures 13.3 Men Working in Open and Semi-open Kitchen, based on sketch by Debanjan Roy (independent artist).



Figure 13.4 Climate Responsive Structures Built at Tikri Border Protest Site, image by Vaidehi Lavand.



Figure 13.5 Tadpaatri or Plastic Used for Constructing Temporary Shelters, image by Vaidehi Lavand.

Mechanism to sustain the settlement

Amenities and infrastructure such as medical facilities, libraries, washing areas, lavatories, and *langar* that evolved as support facility for the protesters catered to them in all adverse conditions. “Village” with “0 km” came as an indication of persons reached at their village is a symbol of the permanent nature of the protest (Singh, 2022). It has been observed that the materials used for the construction of shelters responded to seasonal variations and sustained in heavy rains, winter, and summer. Fans, refrigerators, Internet connections, inverters, generators, solar plates, water purifiers, and water coolers were installed in some of the shelters. Air-coolers and air conditioners were also installed in some of the temporary houses. As mentioned by Shamsher Singh in his chapter, it is interesting to see how associational value emerged in these shelters because of the people residing there. Neighbours invited each other to their house warming, and letters were delivered to the protest site addresses. Some of the interviews also mention the difficulty they endured due to the lack of water supply, waste-collection facilities, electricity, and Internet services. A large medical facility set up by a non-resident Indian doctor from the United States at the Tikri border attended to 4,000–6,000 patients in a day (Singh, 2022).

Looking at the various aspects of settlement patterns, clusters, and architectural character of these temporary shelters, one can relate to Lefebvre’s theory, which suggests that the concept of (social) space is a (social) product. Collective memory was not erased but taken to hometowns and villages by the farmers actively involved in the protest. “Class struggle, its role in the production of space is a cardinal one in that this production is performed solely by classes, fractions of classes and groups representative of classes” (Lefebvre, 1992). Women’s participation in the farmers’ protest at all Delhi borders was very significant and largely evident (Sangwan &

Singh, 2022). Lack of infrastructure, unstable political conditions, and the very transparent, flexible, and porous nature of shelters never stopped the large number of women from playing a significant role in the protest.

The discussion above seeks to understand how social reforms and people's participation can create a space that is visible at both the physical and the abstract level. The support from adjacent settlements and India as an agrarian country made farmers' issue a central issue for all. Power, contestation, and urban spatial politics were the triggering elements in the dissent marked by the protesting farmers. This led to an organised activism, collective action, and mobilisation creating collective memory in the form of a settlement.

The public protest site at the centre of Delhi and the settlement that evolved as an aftermath of the resistance shown by the government have distinctly different characters. The entire infrastructure was supported by the protesters and not by the system. These temporary shelters, clusters, and overall settlement evolved responding to the context; that is the edge of the highway demonstrated vibrancy in a very contextual manner. These sites became places of collective memory and identity, claiming a mark on ground, digital media, and the print media. It helped in spreading the protest to a larger expanse. Not only farmers but also people from different layers of society, right from artists, common people, and villagers around, aided value to the place and supported the protest.

There is also another side to the entire protest settlement or typology of temporal settlement at various protest sites. As mentioned by Shamsher Singh in his articles, the inherent regional and class inequality was quite evident at different sites. The Singhu border was occupied by well-to-do regions of Punjab, therefore making the amenities at the Singhu border quite better than those at other borders. Support systems provided to protesters by the villagers at the Singhu border had an international outreach, leading to maximum funding and support, whereas the Tikri border had very basic amenities and infrastructure, but better than Ghazipur and Shahjahanpur. Beyond just glorification of protest sites at the borders, inherent inequality cannot be overlooked. These examples are well-exhibiting how different classes, communities, and economic status reflect upon different managements at various places. Some regions are prosperous, which reflected in the temporary settlements becoming permanent settlements with the best amenities. As per the discussions with the protesters and visitors to various farmer's protest sites at the border of Delhi it's observed that the Singhu border was most privileged, whereas Tikri and Ghazipur were in between with developed basic amenities and infrastructure. The Shahjahanpur border was in the worst condition compared to others.

Conclusion

Learning from several examples, it can be seen that the Indian government showed resistance in allowing protesters to reach the central visible

spaces at the capital city of Delhi. This led to the creation of a unique counter-space at the Tikri border compared to other cases of protest sites in India and abroad. The chapter shows that the Tikri border's temporary settlement, a significant protest site, became a symbol of people's voice, collective identity, memory, representational spaces, and reappropriation of a space. It provides an understanding of the various layers of the settlement that acted as supporting elements in the protest. Reappropriation of space happened as an unpredictable phenomenon, where no one imagined that this protest would last so long with a long-lasting impact at the end. This temporary settlement was a product of the space created by the people in the process of a social reform. The central argument in the discourse tries to exemplify the significant temporary settlement and protest architecture at the Tikri border which evolved as a prominent statement raising the concern of dissent in democracy.

While the shelters built during the protest are now removed, some were taken back to the villages, to cherish the memory the protesters created on site. The protesters ensured that they leave behind no garbage or debris, which confirms their commitment to the real people's cause of space utilisation and management. When memories are erased on one side by the system such as in Kumbh Mela, to take an example, these protest sites are forever etched into the people's minds as a reminiscence of a successful protest. At all four protest sites, farmers, villagers, and visitors faced unpredictable wait, unstable situation, and constant uncertainty. These settlements acted as a tangible manifestation of this uncertainty. These protest sites are places of cause and can be seen as significant examples of reappropriation of space. Many of the protesters reinstalled their temporary shelters near their houses in their villages as a memory of the protest. Tikri and all other border protest sites would be remembered as places of memory and collective identity.

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Annexure I



Figure 13.6 Image from Google Earth Showing Larger View of Street in the Year 2020 without Shelters.



Figure 13.7 Image from Google Earth Showing Zoom-in Image of Street March 2021 with Shelters.



Debanjan Roy

14 Uploading tractor to Twitter

How protesters used media during farmers' movement

Harinder Happy and Shivam Mogha

Introduction

Despite the continuous work of farmers' unions and a history of movements, various spontaneous moments made the Indian farmers' protest 2020–2021 more significant. The movement saw valuable participation of farmers from the Green Revolution belt, consisting of Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, and the northern part of Rajasthan. There has been a history of farmers' movements in these areas, and resultantly, these areas emerged as proud sites of *ruralism*. The number of people at all the protest sites was limited, and still, the movement echoed in almost every village, small town, university, market, and other space in the areas mentioned earlier and reached faraway locations such as European and American cities. Punjab witnessed many peasant movements before and even after independence. Interestingly, this state has also witnessed a protracted intensity of movement over a long period of time – in the form of migration, where people in considerable numbers migrated to the Western countries for work and resettlement, creating a “distance”. The spirit of supporting the protests from the “outside” has also been a phenomenon of the earlier farmers' movements. Still, there is a clear difference in the flow of information in comparison to this movement. Concerning the farmers' movement 2020–2021, this “distance” strengthened with the global diasporic support for the movement through social media. Despite being situated in a different place, people felt connected with the movement, which was also true for family members of those sitting at the *morchas* at the Delhi borders. Our focus in this chapter is to look at the use and role of media within the protest and to highlight how media networks (*Samyukta Kisan Morcha's* (SKM's) IT cell and associated platforms) established communication within the movement and among its leaders. This analysis is important since the core rationale behind starting the *Kisan IT cell* was to counter the narratives of the state, the ruling party, and their IT cell. We will also analyse the engagement process of the SKM with the media outlets, which was taking place via press notes, press conferences, and networking with sympathisers who were not present at the protest sites.

Methods

The methodology that defines the subject matter of the chapter would affirm the idea of action research and participatory research because of our own engagement and participation in the movement. As far as methods and techniques of the chapter are concerned, we have invoked the idea of digital ethnography and Twitter as a significant site of our research while talking about making the protest a global phenomenon. We have also taken the help of methods like autoethnography and participant observation as important methods of our study because both the authors were part of the farmers' movement. The technique of content analysis was also employed while determining the presence of concepts, words, and themes. In this chapter, the sphere of production, seen from the scope of the public sphere, also leads to the political economy in which corporate management of the Indian state has particularly resulted in the commodification of media. This sphere of influence has been used by the ruling class, whether through rallies by political outfits followed by speeches, or by media creating non-issues and completely ignoring pressing issues and concerns affecting everyday lives, placing religion at the centre of all TV debates. Here, it might not be amiss to use the term Chomsky defines as propaganda for the non-issues under the garb of national prime-time TV debates. According to him, in a propaganda model of media, "Messages from and about dissidents and weak, unorganized individuals and groups, domestic and foreign, are at an initial disadvantage in sourcing *costs* and credibility, and they *often* do not comport with the ideology or interests of the gatekeepers and other powerful parties that influence the filtering process" (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. 31). To polarise Indian society, which is pluralistic essentially, "a propaganda approach to media coverage suggests a systematic and highly political dichotomisation in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests" and "choices for publicity and suppression comprehensible in terms of system advantage, but the modes of handling favored and inconvenient materials (placement, tone, context, fullness of treatment) differ in ways that serve political ends" (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. 35).

Narratives and counter-narratives

It is no hidden fact that India is going through a passive revolution today, with the great silent majority as its motive force, who are not silent anymore. However, the voice of the majority is singing to the tunes of the propaganda produced in the interests of the rich. Running the country has become a business for the politicians, and it can be said that business is booming. This chapter takes stock of two such financial and political overlapping in their most brazen instance of public disregard – in the context of media and agriculture.

More importantly, the use, or rather misuse, of democracy in mobilising people to rally for a reinvention of the Indian state along the

path of Hindi/Hindu Hindustan links the people at the lower end of the social strata with elite interests. Such a mobilisation is achieved by the media, social media, and traditional forms such as print and television, and it is documented that BJP spends the most money than any other political party in India for its advertisement campaign. All this, as the chapter aims to argue, bolsters the need to support the government, in all its violent manifestations, crises, and shortcomings, simply because the individual is interpellated into the bourgeois public sphere. The structural construction of the public sphere, as Oskar Negt (1993) informs us, “has no homogeneous substance whatsoever” and “always consists only of numerous elements that give the impression of belonging together but are in reality joined only outwardly” (p. 13). With the public sphere, especially the bourgeois public sphere, he does not fall into the distinction between public and private because it is the “direct expression of the sphere of production” (*ibid.*).

A tweet whose main content was “why are not we talking about this” changed the political dynamics of the world’s largest democracy in February 2021. Civil society members worldwide criticised the Internet ban at the farmers’ protest sites. The aforementioned statement was tweeted by international rapper Rihana and many other global personalities such as Greta Thunberg and Mia Khalifa. The same happened in India, where several artists, civil society members, social activists, and opposition leaders strongly criticised the issue of the Internet ban at the protest sites. The pro-farmer campaign was so strong that the government of India – and the ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – had to launch a campaign against this. Whereas the BJP claimed that the tweets by Rihana, Greta, and others were part of a toolkit prepared by some “anti-national” elements, the campaign launched by the GoI and BJP was done through an actual toolkit. It was reflected in the content and timings of the tweets. Many similar words were used in tweets of different handles. Here the screenshots explain the story. Khosla, while locating the role of social media in the farmers’ protest, calls this tweet by Rihana as “Indian government’s nightmare” and relates the behaviour of supporters of Indian government with the behaviour of Trump supporters after Trump losing the elections (Khosla, 2021).

Banning the Internet at the protest site has a backdrop. The GoI sent its police and army to forcefully vacate the Ghazipur border protest site on January 28, 2021. There was chaos and uncertainty among some protesters, although farmers firmly stood braving the cold night. It was part of a plan to arrest the central leadership of the *morcha* and forcefully vacate the protest site using the army and police force (The Tribune, 2021a). There were inputs in farmers’ unions that some members, and even lawmakers from the ruling party, were coming with their goons and local weapons. However, this plan was foiled by farmers with the emotional appeal of farmer leader Rakesh Tikait. Analysing the events, the IT wing of the farmers’ protest – *Kisan Ekta Morcha* (KEM), launched a hashtag #ModiPlanningFarmersGenocides. Since the main Twitter accounts that propagated this hashtag were KEM

and Tractor to Twitter, both of these accounts were withheld in India at the request of the GoI. Along with these two handles, more than 200 other accounts of public importance were also suspended. This was done at the request of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, GoI, under section 69A of the IT Act.

This was not an isolated phenomenon, as the GoI has constantly been trying to defame the protesters right from the time the protest started. Farmers have been protesting since the laws were introduced, that is June 2020. The forms of protests were changing; initially, it started the mobilisation process through small meetings in villages, then block- and district-level protests, then tractor marches, protests at the toll plaza and rail roko, ultimately reaching the Delhi borders on November 27, 2020. Even after 12 rounds of formal talks with the government, the demands were not met, and both sides could not conclude. Farmers' leaders had warned for a Kisan Republic Parade to be held inside the capital city of India – Delhi, on January 26, the Republic Day in India. Although farmers' unions had issued precise and detailed guidelines about the parade, many protesters violated the designated route of the tractor march. This section entered the centre of Delhi and hoisted the Sikh flag at the historic Lal Qila – Red Fort. The Red Fort has significance for both the state and the Punjabi protesters. For the government of India, it is the iconic location where the prime minister of India hoists the national flag every year on August 15 while celebrating Independence Day.

In contrast, the Sikh and Punjabi protesters see Lal Qila as a site to show resistance. Earlier, Baba Banda Singh Bahadur had hoisted the Sikh flag after winning the Delhi chair, and similarly, there are many other instances when this symbolic resistance has been observed, and this was one of the prime sources of inspiration for the Sikh protesters of this farmers' protest. On January 26, 2021, there was a clash between the protesters and the state armed forces like Delhi police and the central reserve police force (CRPF). The government tried to paint this protest as Khalistani-hijacked. Citing the same reason, the Internet was shut down at all the protest sites of Delhi borders. This was when the IT wing of the farmers' protest worked hard to deliver every possible information to the farmers and the general masses. This was also when farmers asserted their own "Media" and "IT cell". Fearing considerable engagement with the IT wings of farmers' unions, the accounts related to farmers' protests were suspended so that the protesters would be rendered helpless.

Causality and structure of the farmers' IT cell

There were particular reasons for initiating this IT cell of farmers. The first and foremost target behind starting an IT cell of the farmers' protest was to counter the narratives of the Godi media – a word used for pro-government media. Farmers were being termed as terrorists, extremists, khalistanis,

Naxalites, and whatnot. This was not a rare phenomenon. One of the cabinet ministers who was part of dialogues with farmers had also termed farmers Maoists (The Indian Express, 2020). Later in March 2021, the prime minister referred to protesting farmers as parasites and andolanjivis (Times of India, 2021). So, farmers felt a strong need to launch the social media cell from where they could at least counter this propaganda. The second factor behind the establishment of IT cell was that farmers had minimal media channels covering the protest with a just and fair eye. Most of the media houses were prejudiced against farmers and only covered the ground with the intention to harm the protest. We caught a media person chatting with his boss, his boss directing the reporter to cover a space where there were fewer protesters so that they could show there were significantly fewer farmers at protest sites.

Similarly, media persons went to the farmers who were either hesitant to talk to the media or those who were highly frustrated with the government and media. Ultimately, the coverage of the protest by the media was not in favour of farmers. There was a unified need for the protest stories to go to the ordinary masses; for that, farmers needed a platform where we could upload the material that would be easily accessible to the masses.

The third important cause behind the IT cell was filling the coordination gap. In this era of technology, many farmers and their sons and daughters have android mobile phones. They also raised their voices for farmers, but individually. Even though many of the farmers' unions have their own social media pages, they were uploading content related to their unions also. Many people supported the farmers' protest but could not come physically. Many were IT experts with good graphics, posters, and content knowledge. The founding team of the IT cell gathered such interested people together at a platform that is authentic and from where the message can be spread all over the world. It was much needed as people were working in isolation before this, and their reach was limited.

Other than these push factors, some pull factors formally encouraged farmers to launch an IT cell. The foremost cause was that farmers had to spread their propaganda – pro-farmer and pro-people propaganda. This narrative was not only about rhetoric but also about logical and legal, to be used by any and all protesters or supporters of the ongoing movement. This objective was to be fulfilled at three levels. One – there was a roadmap for the farmers. This was explicitly about farm laws and MSP. After a time, this was further enlarged to several non-technical farming issues like social justice, gender sensitivity, equality, fraternity, and unity among all kinds of people. It was an in-house plan, so it had a limited crowd. The second level was about spreading the organic ideas of the protest and farming to the general masses. For this, the IT wing needed help from farmers' unions, singers, employees, student unions, and all other civil society members. As it was done for the general masses, the language and content differed from that of the farmers' unions. There were few cases where the perception of the Indian middle class

became very problematic. We can see that in the case of air pollution in Delhi, farmers are often blamed for it. In these circumstances, creating a pro-farmer sentiment was necessary. The third level relates to the non-residential Indian (NRI) crowd, which has a sense of solidarity for farmers' protests but needs to be coordinated.

When the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) began at Shaheen Bagh, thousands of people joined as protesters to challenge the government which made citizenship exclusive through amendments and laws. The protest site became a literal platform with a podium, a stage, and open-mic sessions before large audiences, and Sikh farmers from Punjab held *langars* or free messes as a part of their services, which were partially out of goodwill and partially religious obligation. What emerged from the Shaheen Bagh protest was such a threat to the Indian state that almost a score of activists who were merely marking their support through presence were framed by the Delhi police and detained, kept behind bars amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and some are still languishing in jails. The government did not revoke the CAA, but certain organisations closely associated with the ruling BJP like Bajrang Dal incited an infamous assault of a massive scale upon various localities in the city of Delhi, and the main agenda was to divert the issue from the protest through the use of violence. Acting as a mass gathering where poetry was sung, prayers were offered, and public meetings decided the fate of the movement, the Shaheen Bagh protests were by all means peaceful but had to abruptly end following the riots without a resolution. However, the government with its unrelenting disregard for all sections of society also introduced the Indian Agriculture Acts of 2020, or the infamous Farm Laws, which ushered a wave of protests and discontent on the part of the farmers. When the farmer organisations made their way from neighbouring states like Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh towards Delhi to register their protest in large numbers, they were brutally clamped down by the police forces, border security forces, and paramilitary forces. To literally add insult to the injury, media channels all across the broadcast spectrum of television denigrated the farmers and addressed them as separatists and Sikh militants (*Khālistānī*).

In a big protest like this, it was obvious that some elements could disturb the protest. While farmers were concerned about the internal contradictions, they were more attentive to the state agencies. Morphed and fake messages were spread in the name of farmers' leaders. We felt a strong need to have an official channel where formal messages could be sent. Altogether these causes made a base for the IT cell, and in the SKM's national meeting on December 19, 2020, it was approved that there will be an official IT cell named KEM. Initially, the team launched Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat accounts of the *morcha*. Snapchat was not much used, but the rest were highly used. Parallel to this virtual shutdown, there

were WhatsApp accounts used for coordinating and promoting the content. There were mainly four types of WhatsApp groups.

1. Official groups for SKM Press statements;
2. SKM interactive groups where internal discussions used to take place. The same group was used for content and photo/video collection from all over the sites of protests and states;
3. State-level groups, which were used to the highly promote verified information related to the protest;
4. KEM content collection groups where social media teams gathered content from various sources which were uploaded on KEM and other platforms.

It is important to note that it was not only the KEM which is the IT cell of farmers. There are stakeholders like Tractor to Twitter, *Trolley Times*, *Swachch Kisan Morcha*, Kisan IT Cell, Ann Data, Unfriendly Robot, and Human Cost of Protest, which strongly raised the voice of the farmers' protest at the digital level. Other than these handles, there were a few farmers' unions whose social media handles have a vital reach, such as BKU Charuni, BKU Tikait, BKU Ekta Ugrahan, All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), All India Kisan Mahasabha, and BKU Ekta Dakaunda, whose coordination was needed. With the initiation of KEM, the functioning of the IT cell became more significant.

Encountering the propaganda and emergence of peoples' media

In a detailed analysis of the media coverage of the farmers' movement in India, the entire working of such a biased and lopsided media apparatus will be revealed, but before that, the state of the media has to be understood in connection to the conditions of reporting in the Indian state. Rammanohar Reddy (2099) notes, "[i]n the Hindi language, it is an acknowledged fact that the aggressive mobilisation of what was called Hindu 'sentiment' in north India, which was voiced in Hindi newspapers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, contributed significantly to the rising circulation of newspapers" (p. 188). Furthermore, the liberalisation of the economy opening up the economy to privatisation saw the rise of commercial news channels owned by conglomerates like Zee, the Times Group, and Reliance which exhibited increasingly conservative and, after 2015, extremely pro-state news content. In the face of rising state pressure, the media "decided that they would not be 'antinational' in their reporting, and some TV channels in particular took to commentary that could only be described as warmongering" (Reddy, 2019, p. 186). He further notes:

What has been different in recent decades is that journalism has been defined not so much by the authenticity, reliability, and depth of its

coverage but by how well it sold itself (including in packaging) as a commodity. This is true of the publications of all media companies – the older family-owned companies, the new entrants to the media, and the business empires that entered the media, both print and broadcast. While there were, of course, notable exceptions among newspapers and magazines, less so in TV, the overall complexion of the media changed – away from serious reporting and toward, to put it strongly, trivialization.

(Reddy, 2019, p. 196)

So, it is not just information but media itself that is bought and sold in the market as a commodity. Couple that with a polarising tendency of the ruling class in the name of religion so that the division of the people throughout the country remains intact, as it was during the colonial reign, and what we get is an ideal recalibrated model of imperialist state turning its own citizens into colonial subjects. The repression of journalists, students, and activists by the draconian sedition laws on false trumped-up charges simply because they were a part of protests testifies to the imperialist and colonial legacy of the state that the post-independence Indian government has been unable to shrug off. Aijaz Ahmad draws upon categories such state, law, political organisations, and trade unions to set up culture “at great remove from economy” and therefore “the most easily available for idealisation and theoretical slip-page”, thus giving way for “an inherent tendency towards national and civilizational singularization” (Ahmad, 1994, p. 8). He further notes, “cultural domination is doubtless a major aspect of imperialist domination as such”, and “cultural contradictions within the imperialized formations tend to be so very numerous – sometimes along class lines but also in cross-class configurations, as in the case of patriarchal cultural forms or the religious modes of social authorisation – that the totality of indigenous culture can hardly be positioned as a unified, transparent site of anti-imperialist resistance” (*ibid.*). What he understands as “cultural nationalism” is a trans-national phenomenon, a consequence of imperialism, but here it must be reworked with the critique Aijaz Ahmad himself lays upon the functionality of the term. The progressive and retrograde forms of nationalism propagated by the Indian bourgeoisie and the ruling class are perfectly expressed through the rise of ethnic bigotry akin to the racial superiority of 1930s’ Germany, sharing a similar antipathy towards the minority and the poor.

During the entire process of this protest, a common phenomenon was found in media coverage. As farmers had a trust deficit with the government, farmers faced similar issues with the media. They had significantly fewer expectations from the mainstream media. Farmers from Punjab were familiar with the local newspapers and some YouTube channels, which certainly raised their confidence, whereas the same was not the case with farmers from Haryana.

Although the farmers struggled to get fair reporting of the protest throughout the year, there were a few incidents where they were specifically targeted and labelled. When farmers were protesting in Punjab, they were labelled Congress-sponsored since Congress was the ruling party in the state. Left-leaning farmers' unions were mobilising people at a significant level. On December 10, 2020, on International Human Rights Day, a programme was organised by BKU Ekta Ugrahan, a leftist farmers' union, demanding the release of political prisoners. This was widely covered, and it labelled the entire protest as "Naxalite". Leaders from the left farmers' unions openly accepted that they read the literature of Marxism and studied all the forms of communist movements; the media channels used to run the trimmed videos of these statements to label the protest.

As mentioned earlier, on January 26, 2021, when a significant group of protesters hoisted the Khalsa flag at the Red Fort in Delhi, the entire protest was labelled as Khalistani. A large section of Punjab protesters had installed photos of Saint Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and other Sikh figures on their trollies. Many of the trollies already had photographs of Sikh political prisoners, which a section of the media used, to label the farmers' protests as Khalistan.

While the farmers' protests were enriching the struggle for a just and fair society, they also struggled for a fair process. There were moments in the protest that forced the leaders, farmers, and sympathisers to look deeply into the various strata within the agrarian society. There were incidents of sexual harassment at the protest sites, and a big question was the participation of Dalits, where scholars point out the conflicts in the protest (Sabharwal & Singh, 2022). While these issues have a more considerable significance, the media reporting of these issues was not to raise and address them; instead, it was to defame the protest. Disappointed with the reporting, a survivor of sexual harassment raised questions about the media reports on her issue, and how the whole protest was targeted.

There were several events when caste conflicts took place at the farmers' protests, but the most significantly covered issue was the murder of a Dalit at the Singhu border site. The ruling party made multiple attempts to make this protest a conflict of Kisan versus mazdoor, and it was this moment that got the most attention. It was also the time when the government was on the back foot because of the Lakhimpur Kheri incident, where four farmers and one journalist were murdered by the speeding car of cabinet minister Ajay Mishra Tani on October 3, 2021. The killing of the Dalit on October 15, 2021, at the Singhu border was neither a caste issue nor related to the farmers' protests. It was a religious and criminal issue, but since the location of the incident was a protest site, a certain accountability lay to the farmers' union leaders and the entire protest. This, however, was propagated as a natural behaviour of "farmers" and "Sikhs". The Godi media tried to hide all the work done by Sikhs' emotions with the Singhu incident. Still, things

became clearer after a report in *Tribune* revealed that the accused had been secretly engaged with the government and some other suspected persons (The Tribune, 2021b). Similarly, a report of *The Caravan* revealed that the accused was new to the victim's village and had recently started frequent visits to the victim's home (Tur, 2021). These reports not only countered the anti-farmer narrative but also proved that these attempts are facilitated by the state and then propagated by the media.

For the entire period of the farmers' protest, the KEM team daily launched a Twitter trending campaign. Usually, team KEM used to issue a hashtag through its official Twitter handle. This hashtag was used to remind the Twitter population and the government on a daily basis. These hashtags are used to get tremendous support on some occasions. More than 576k tweets used the hashtag #आज_भारत_बंद_है on the *Bharat bandh* of September 27, 2021. Likewise, #मुज़फ़्फ़रनगरम्_किसान was tweeted by more than two lakh tweets. The most common hashtag was #FarmersProtest, which was used globally and throughout the protest.

Sekar and Siwach (2020) analysed the narratives by the Twitter handles of media channels; there were very less news channels that gave balanced and pro-protest narratives. In contrast, the songs of this protest became a main medium of communication where artists directed the people from time to time. The songs of the farmers' protest had played roles as in, according to Bainiwal (2022),

- (1) preserving the protest for future generations through its lyrics and music videos;
- (2) placing the protest in dialogue with historical movements and individuals; and
- (3) connecting the diaspora to what was happening on the ground in Delhi.

The impact of the IT cell on farmers was not limited to 13 months of the farmers' protests. The kind of content generated and propagated made it a more unique, comprehensive, and people's platform. Along with the protest's main demands, these platforms were also used to raise agricultural and non-agricultural issues. For the Doaba region of Punjab and the western Uttar Pradesh, the sugar cane crops' payments are a significant cause, and it was strongly raised via the KEM platforms. The bonus for wheat loss, the compensation for stubble management, Mattewara forest, Dam Safety Act, and the Bhakhra Beas Management Board are significant issues frequently raised with the leaders of farmers' IT cell.

The credibility and acceptance of KEM and other platforms lie in the impartial nature of working. Acknowledging that this farmers' protest consists of several ideologies and people, the IT cell team tried hard to incorporate the content of all the diverse thoughts. There was hardly any content provided by any union or leader that was not uploaded on these

platforms. Some standard numbers were issued where the content was used to send and then uploaded to the concerned application.

Trolley Times: carrying the tradition of print media in protests

Going into the details about the coverage of the significant task done by *Trolley Times* of familiarising the farmers with news that concerned their own issues and relevant experiences also helps in providing information, to them and for others interested in gaining information, about the movement from the side of the farmers, steering away their focus from the negative image and false narratives created by mainstream media houses. While the mainstream media was communitarian, conservative, and anti-minority in their entire coverage of the movement, as it could be expected of them, *Trolley Times* became an emblem of alternative grassroots media, which was organised and run by youth and students coming from farming backgrounds, whose parents had joined the movement as protesters. The article was published in vernacular languages to ensure proper reach and readability. Christophe Jaffrelot notes in the case of the relationship between the Modi government and the farmers:

The BJP did not even come to the aid of farmers, those who – unlike farmworkers – owned parcels of land and sold their surplus. When measures to help them were announced, beneficial effects did not follow. The crop insurance scheme against natural disasters suffered from excessive bureaucratic centralism – related to the fact that Modi was seeking to take personal credit for it. Its management was handed over to a private firm, Anil Ambani’s company, which profited more from it than farmers did.

(Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 134)

Through their policies of blocking the export of farmers, or importing more goods, the Modi government created an inflation, which is even now wreaking havoc with the price rise of everyday goods such as petrol and vegetable. The loans promised by farmers were by default just waivers that attracted the farmers towards the big banks to avail the benefits, which meant risk taking on the part of the farmers and money making on the part of finance capital. This is to illustrate that in the ethnic democracy of Modi’s India, the poor become poorer and the rich become richer, not simply due to the free market but also owing to government policies aiding this process and the traditional media failing to call out this unholy liaison and function as a watchdog of constitutional democracy. BJP’s, or more particularly Modi’s, ethnic democracy is “brand of moral policing, reminiscent of the orthopraxy – or social control – characteristic of patriarchal traditions and the caste system” “coupled with promotion of the Hindu culture, defined as Indian culture and equated with it, in which the state, for a change, played a key role” (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 157). In a section of “*trolling journalists*”, Jaffrelot (2021) recalls

how social media has also been used to target the community of journalists like Barkha Dutt, Rana Ayyub, and Ravish Kumar, calling trolls “new brand of Hindu nationalist militant”, and like “academics who refrain from inviting JNU colleagues out of fear of reprisal, local newspapers no longer commission editorials from Ravish Kumar, and parents forbid their children from following him on Twitter and Facebook” (pp. 236–40).

Trolley Times, however, emerged as a grounded source of information that dealt with the issues of the political and logistical issues of the farmers. It served as an insular media platform to educate the farmers about the demerits of the farm laws and the historic juncture at which the protest was taking place. While searching “do protests pave the way for newspapers?”, Arora tracked four historic protests of Punjab where the role of newspapers was significant – “*Kirti*” in labour rights and independence movement in 1926, “*Akali*” in Gurudwara Reforms Movement in 1920, “*Ghadar*” in independence movement in 1913, and “*Jhang Sayal*” from Pagdi Sambhal Lehar in 1907 (Arora, 2021).

There were setbacks and glorious moments in the farmers’ movement, all of them covered to the dot by *Trolley Times*. However, the success story of *Trolley Times* lies in its assiduous networking, in the way it captured “the flow of commodities, technologies, and populations, of information, images, and narratives, of life-styles, means of expression, and modes of representation” in a way that “enriched the arsenal of alternative public spheres that continue to emerge and organize on the local level” (Negt, 1993, p. xiv). The traditional media houses achieve a “mechanism of division with regard to the substantive will of society [which] extends, however, from politics right into the structures of the psyche” and “is just as preorganized within the real basis of this public sphere, in other words in the productive sector, as it is in language, culture, life-styles, and forms of communication” (Negt & Kluge, 1993, p. 55). It is the intention of the bourgeois media that “workers are as a rule separated from the psychic and institutional tools with which they could adapt the bourgeois public sphere to their interests or create specific forms of their own public sphere” and so “the empirical working-class public sphere often appears as a variant of the bourgeois public sphere” (ibid.: 58). In the case of the farmers’ movement, the rich landed farmers had joined forces with the sharecroppers and even the farmworkers who were united in their plight caused by the introduction of the new draconian farm laws.

Moreover, since the bulk of soldiers who serve the country come from a generation of farmers, the slogan *Jai Jawān Jai kisān* (Hail soldiers, hail farmers) suggested a larger unity at least in terms of organisational reach and popular support, and many soldier sons of parent farmers and retired soldiers currently living their lives as farmers played a key role in the movement. One of the stories in the initial edition of a newspaper was on an ex-serviceman, which shows a sense of solidarity and close relation of farmers and soldiers (Singh & Sinha, 2023).

As you can see, the percolation of news from and about *Trolley Times* also made its reach into traditional print media, albeit in their digital platform.

The New York-based *Vice News*, on its Asia section, also reported on *Trolley Times* as giving the farmers an agency of expression and casting light upon its organising principles. As an alternative journalistic venture, *Trolley Times* was emblematic in numerous ways; for instance, the very mention of trolleys represents the migrant farmers' nomadic and travel-savvy readiness to participate in the protest at the call of their leaders. It also served as accommodations for farmers staying on the roads, as makeshift canteens, libraries, and meeting rooms, some were also air-conditioned for special guests and extenuating circumstances.

The crew bringing out *Trolley Times* consisted of university students, passionate amateurs in the suit of journalism, carrying out a labour of love. The protesters as farmers and those participating in the publication of *Trolley Times* as educated students might be a difference worth disrupting because the traditional media seem to prefer a one-way communication, or rather a broadcast of Modi's speeches and official activities, completely muzzled and unable to question him. Suffice to say that, *Trolley Times* registers an alternative to the "the mainstream media [that] has been taken over – at least in the realm of electronic media – by pro-government channels", "either because of ideological affinities or economic dependence", clearly displaying the "dimension of the Indian brand of crony capitalism" (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 303). The government and fascist forces had attempted to hijack the movement time and again, once on the eve of the Republic Day. The physical threat to the farmers was also something that *Trolley Times* addressed, as well as the misrepresentation of their issues to such an extent, that the farmers at the protest drove the media away, and whenever they came with their pro-government question, it was all thanks to *Trolley Times* that they got a befitting reply and the media personnel were themselves found to be making obscurantist claims and diverting the public from their main issues.

Conclusion

The reach of the farmers' movements drew on all forms of communication from interpersonal to digital spaces of interaction. The involvement in the farmers' movement of the youth, especially from a rural background, through their digital media literacy and capacity to collaborate and produce content provided a positive network which was used by the leaders of the farmers' movement. Such an organic coalition between traditional farmers' unions and the modern digital cyberspace is indeed a very peculiar feature of this movement, which shall have larger implications. This was recognised as a fact by the government, and they responded to the claim laid by the movement upon the cyberspace by banning Internet from the protest sites.

The involvement of university students from regional and metropolitan areas provided the opportunity of a cross-regional networking based on solidarity for the movement. Even after the victorious struggle against the farm laws, this relation between the farmers and the university students provides a key reference point in the entry point of this study. The possibility

of collaboration between the various agricultural communities was also successful due to the ambitious and upward social mobility so characteristic of the youth involved in different fields of education and technological training. With the skills they had to offer, they also had new ideas not regarding the future leadership but of its future networking and modes of functioning in a network society. It can be said that due to the farmers' movement, cyber-ethnography and media ethnography as a practice can be redefined as not that far removed from the physical dynamics and involvement in the movement but active and contributive as a process of participation to construct a comfortable digital ecosystem.

Complementary to this digital ecosystem is the traditional form of communication, evident in the functioning of *Trolley Times*, coordinated by the students for the benefit of providing information to the agricultural community that turned up as protesters and was joined by members of the civil society. While members of the civil society joined as supporters, they had little to do with the way the movement was channelised, and it was the youth intelligentsia that worked much closer with the leaders of the farmers' unions, albeit in a technical manner. Even if their participation was limited in terms of deliberation upon decision-making, the contribution of the youth was essential in providing logistic support. Such a model of intergenerational support, peculiar to the farmers' movement, should not be seen as complementary of it. In some senses, the assumption of authority by the senior leadership in terms of age and experience is understood as the natural order; however, such a position has to be seen and understood in relational terms, keeping in mind the antagonistic temperament of the government. Social groups working together across age, gender, caste, and such concrete markers of identity, towards the success of a movement that they might not directly benefit from, is a result of the mobilisation of solidarity by the organising forces, that is the unions, that strongly establishes the notion that India begs to be seen as an agrarian society but certainly not in the Gandhian version of the ideal and self-sufficient village. Regis Debrays argues for a coming-together by the use of media technology in the following manner:

The abolition of delays and distances of communication between groups in the global village does not erase all borders and mix together peoples' hearts into one. Quite to the contrary, the material unity of our mechanical devisings seems to revivify the ethno-cultural divisiveness of dispositions.

(Debray, 1996, p. 127)

This statement rightly points out to the ambiguous use of technology with respect to bringing people together or dividing them. Both these processes were evident in the formation of global village groups: one supporters of the government and biased mainstream media and the other finding their contradiction and critique through the course of the movement and its alternative forms of media used by the farmers during the protests.

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Debanjan Roy

15 Protest songs of identity and existence in the peasants' movement

Prateek

Introduction

The biggest takeaway from the success story of the farmers' movement (*kisan andolan*) is that it has laid down certain parameters that any movement could be successful if it creates a social, political, and cultural relevance for its demands in the society. The corner stone of the kisan andolan is the unity and consciousness of the Jats that bound together a diverse linguistic and religious mass of people. The Jats are not only ethnically of the same stock but professionally are also the cultivators of land, which makes them a closely knit socio-economic group with similar rural farming ethos and culture (Abul, 2010; Habib, 2022; Prateek, 2015). The Jats of Punjab and Haryana had seen difference of opinion and interests over the issues like Chandigarh, language, and religion during the division of the Punjab state. It is the first time that the farmers' movement brought the Jats of Punjab and Haryana closer on an economic issue along with Uttar Pradesh (UP), Delhi, and Rajasthan's Jats backing up the movement. This communitarian solidarity and brotherhood translated into a solid political block consisting crores of voters that created huge pressure on the government that could potentially lead to electoral setbacks.

The popular songs of the kisan andolan are a welcoming phenomenon for the music and film industry in the same manner as it is for the politics of the nation. It is a remarkable feat that earmarks a healthy political trend. The Punjab film and music industry had set an example just like the Punjab's farmers by voicing the demands and concerns of the people through their art. The music and film industry of Punjab has surprised the people of India by coming out openly against the government's diktat of implementing three controversial agricultural laws. The icons of Punjabi cultural industry decisively came into support of the movement that helped in popularising the movement among the masses. The difference in response of the Bollywood and Punjab music industry, the two of the largest cultural industries of not only India but also the world (some researchers estimate the worth of the Punjab music industry in several thousand crores), comes from the Punjabi music industry's social composition and its successful politicisation during the ongoing farmers' movement.

The majority of the singers and film stars of Punjab come from the traditional cultivating caste called the Jat. The Jat had gained the reputation of agriculturist par excellence in the Mughal period and has dominated Punjab and Haryana as the main landowning caste down to the modern time. The entire material and social culture of Punjab is heavily dominated by the rural agricultural ethos that revolve around the life of a peasant. Agriculture is still a profitable and serious business in Punjab (Jodhka, 2021). A successful film star or singer is deeply rooted in the rural village life; most of them were actively involved in farming before making it big in the cultural field (Punjab Hulchul, 2021).

To understand the pro-farmer movement music which was produced during the course of the agitation, we need to look into the social and material context of those who made this music.

Stars politicisation – kisan consciousness

The singers had a natural and organic connect with the farmers' issues from the beginning, and it did not take them long to react to the ongoing farmers' agitation. According to some estimates, the size, worth, and influence of the Punjabi music industry are only second to Bollywood in India (Baljeet Parmar 4 U, 2022).

The singers of the industry felt the need to show solidarity with the movement, so they tried to organise themselves by calling meetings. They planned to utilise their star power by singing songs about the issue. At the outset, the singers did not understand the issues of the long-term agricultural crisis Punjab was going through. They approached different persons who could help them in gaining the know-how beyond a general idea about the ongoing agitation. At this juncture, the farmers' unions became the tool to make them understand the graveness of the issues involved and the possible solution for it. These farmers' unions belonged to the broad left political ideology. These farmers' unions have been active in Punjab since many years. The left trade unions traditionally had a long-held narrative against the neoliberalism and its effects on the farming community. These unions had been working among the farmers relentlessly, but they had a limited influence and popularity, but this time when the farmers feared for their fields, they looked towards these unions rather than the traditional political parties. The farmers' leaders who are veteran trade unionists explained the complex policies that shape their lives and fate through simple metaphors in Punjabi language (The Punjab TV, 2021). The concepts like neoliberalism and crony capitalism were introduced and popularised among the farmers by making them understand the government and corporate nexus that could grab their land and means of livelihood. This process of politicisation of the masses became so successful that the two corporate giants of India, Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani became the new age symbols of traditional "*lala*" of Punjab who exploited the

rural folk by keeping them in perpetual debt trap with the active support and protection from the British government. Soon the Reliance industries of Mukesh Ambani became the target of farmers' fury as the farmers gave a call to boycott products of Reliance industries. The villagers destroyed hundreds of telecom towers and picketed in front of Reliance petrol pumps, Reliance Fresh, etc., along with switching over to other telecom operators instead of Reliance Jio (NDTV, 2020).

It is, perhaps, for the first time in this part of the country that the masses accepted the left's ideology and narrative so thoroughly that it raised their level of political consciousness and determination of resistance. The other major inspiration for the people in Punjab to fight for their rights was Sikhism. The Sikh history of struggle against the Mughals (Snehi, 2022) and then Britishers (IGNOU, 2017) motivated the old and young Punjabis, turning this into a religious battle of right versus the wrong, evil versus the virtuous. The Sikh ethos were a crucial energy that bound together the entire Sikh population of not only Punjab but also the entire India and abroad. This effectively meant that non-farming communities supported the farmers' cause and created an atmosphere of sympathy towards the cause. The Punjabis of all religions, castes, and creeds were apprehensive and nervous about what the farmers' movement had in store for the Punjabis. The society decided upon a show of unity and solidarity, which in turn meant unity of rural–urban, Hindu–Sikh, and Jats–non-Jats. Music artists made this broader unity the focus of their songs and highlighted how important this battle is for the future generations. Hartosh Singh Bal has summarised the phenomenon aptly that this movement possesses the combination of left ideology and Sikhism along with the tribal ethos shared equally by the Jats of Punjab, Haryana, and UP (Bal, 2021).

Creating a connect through dominant culture

Through the use of the Internet and smartphone and with the help of online apps like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, the Punjab music industry was able to reach to its audience and create a massive fan base among the youth all over the world (FrontRow, 2022). The technological penetration has made it possible to create a direct and personalised connection between the fans and influencers where a star is available 24×7. The Jats in Punjab hold a tight grip over the cultural values of Punjab by appropriating the “Punjabiya” (Roy, 2010), traditional dances, music, and *qissas*, by valorising the Jat village rusticity, also widely known as “*Jattwaad*”. The Punjabi stars, particularly Jats who literally dominate every aspect of cultural life of Punjab, have accumulated a wealth of cultural capital that was used to its full potential in the farmers' movement (Abbi, 2022). The star power disseminated the agenda, politics, and emotions of the movement to not only its fans but also the entire world, creating a buzz about the movement (The Daily Show, 2021). The visuals of the barricading, perpetration of state violence showed

in the songs on the protesters generated a wave of sympathy for the protesters around the world (Internet Rabbit Hole Daily, 2021).

Songs of the movement

Punjab

The Green Revolution had significantly uplifted the peasants' economic condition. The songs of Punjab had celebrated this new prosperity dubbed as the songs of progress were sung in the public gatherings called *Khada*, wherein a husband and wife are contemplating what they can buy from the income incurred from the bumper harvest. They decide upon buying a new television that can make the pictures speak.

Vich Ranjhe gallan karde ne te Heeran boldiyan
Mainu Television laide ve tasveeran boldiyan
 (Muhammad Sadiq – Topic, 2015)

However, the decades after the 2000s present a stark opposition to this happy and wealthy farmer to a farmer who is heavily caught in the debt trap so that he has to sell his dearest durable to survive. The peasant could not overcome the debt trap even after toiling hard; he ultimately had to sell his cherished Ford tractor that he loved like his son. It is one of the most iconic songs of late singer Raj Brar.

Na latheya sar ton karza mitti vich mitti hoke
Putt wargha Ford tractor Jatt ne vecheya ro ro ke.
 (Team Music, 2011)

Similarly, Babbu Maan's *Jatt di Joon Buri* describes the life of a common farmer who is helpless, poor, and debt-ridden and declares that the life of a Jat is bad who is destined to die daily (Babbu Maan, 2014b). Another song by Babbu Maan released in 2014, *Mandiyan ch Jatt rulda* continues the narrative of a ruined farmer family that is caught in multitudes of crisis emerging out of the difficult economic conditions. The farmer has lost the dignity of life, whereas the Baniya (business community) is calling the shots.

Bapu vi vichare kithe jaan, karza ne kha laye khwab
Natth paai dekho Jattan nu, Baniye de hatthan ch kamaan.
 (Babbu Maan, 2014a)

Vinaypal Buttar created a hard-hitting satirical song that cheerfully describes the hardships of a peasant. In the song, a witch is threatening the peasant that she will convert him into a Baniya, daring his Jat pride¹ but

surprisingly the Jat accepts the proposition gleefully, leaving the pretence of a Jat pride that offers nothing but a doomed life (SagaHits, 2012).

*Kehndi tere andar baitha ziddi Jatt bhajadu,
Tere mundeya di main foki taur nu natth jehi paadu,
Main aah kardu, main vaah kardu, teri family da Baniya sabha kardu
Jatt kehnda hor mainu ki chahida, meri dubdi kisani nu je lawen tu bacha.*

Babbu Maan Adab Punjabi 2 and 3 (with *kisan* ploughing field logo on the right corner of the screen)

*Oye Aayi te jad Maan aa jawe Chann hi chaadh dindae
Jatt Jaat je adje mitron gabbeyon paad dindae*

This song is quite long and talks about the state of Indian politics and society at large. The lyricist cum singer has targeted the illiterate politicians for exploiting the religious sentiments of the public. It talks about bringing change in the system by the direct intervention of the common masses in politics. The soldiers are sacrificing their lives on the Indian borders, whereas the peasants are shedding their blood on the Delhi borders. The rights of the workers and peasants should be duly given to them. Let the peasants protest peacefully; otherwise, the Jatt will destruct and squander Delhi into pieces. The gentleman (PM) was a better person when he was a tea seller, he masqueraded as a turban wearing *Sardar* (Sikh) during the emergency days. The combination of *Jatts* and *Jaats* together can tear apart (enemy) from the middle. India has had skirmishes with the neighbouring countries (China), but the government is capable of only boasting and posturing through hacking the entire Indian media.

Attack on Modi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is not a popular figure in Punjab. The protest songs in Punjab attacked the prime minister scathingly by making direct personal comments and calling him names like tea seller, and the use of *tu*, *taithon*, *tainu*, etc., is a clear marker of the anger that Punjabis have for him.

*Putha panga lai leya Modiya, Hatth Jatta di zameen nu paake
Raj taithon hunda sambh na, Sambh lai tu chah aala khokha*
(Hassan Manak – Topic, 2020)

This song is based on an old Punjabi hit track by Mohd. Sadiq and Ranjit Kaur, *Putha panga lai leya Jattiye* (Saregama Punjabi, 2022). The song is sung by Hassan Manak and written by Rana Mallukotia who declares that Modi has messed it up this time by trying to grab the Jats' land. He is incapable

of running the government, so he should move back to his old business of selling tea. He could not even keep his wife, so how can one expect him to safeguard the country. The Punjabis will eat him like a *paan* (betel leaf).

Haryana–Punjab unity/fellowship and targeting Delhi

The movement was markedly different from the earlier peasant movements in the region because of its ability to expand out of its core area of Punjab to Haryana and western UP. Unlike the earlier movements in history that had happened mainly because localised issues had remained local in character, the issue of the three agricultural laws was affecting the entire Green Revolution belt the most. The protesting peasant unions decided to move towards Delhi to demand a rollback of the laws passed in the parliament. They had to cross Haryana first to reach Delhi, but the Haryana state government had blocked the highways to restrict the peasants' march towards Delhi. This had created a wave of sympathy among the local Haryana farmers who came out to help the farmers from Punjab who were estranged in an unknown area (Deswal, 2021). The farmers from the two states developed a sense of brotherhood (fellowship) as they stayed together in this movement for more than a year (Punjab Kesari Haryana, 2021). The movement became a space where cultural exchanges took place and a sense of shared history, ancestry, and culture developed over the period (Saini, 2020). The villagers from Haryana supplied milk, *lassi*, vegetables, and other crucial logistical support along with the much-needed security in a BJP-governed state.

The songs produced in Punjabi reflected this affinity among the farmers of the two states as Jat (Punjabi)–Jaat (Haryanvi) unity that lent crucial support to the Punjabis in the wake of vehement onslaught from the state and state-sponsored media. Apart from the logistical support, the Haryanvi Jats exonerated the Punjabis from the “*Khalistani*” label that was being used to desperately snub the movement and invoke passions of public against the agitating farmers as anti-India. This friendly relationship between the farmers of Haryana and Punjab became famous as *Bada Bhai* (Punjab) and *Chhota Bhai* (Haryana) who had been separated in 1966 but now have come together for the common cause (Saini, 2021). Rakesh Tikait, farmer leader from UP whose elder brother heads the *Baliyan Khap*, tried to give a new interpretation to this newly found unity. He claimed a common historical Jat ancestral social organisation based on *Khaps*. He propagated this particular view as a historical fact that about 300 years ago all the Jats got divided on the basis of language, culture, and religion, but this farmers' movement has brought them together once again.²

It is important to understand that Delhi for centuries has been the seat of power in the imagination of common Indians. It is the metaphor for the powers that be. The Sikh history had always targeted Delhi and Lahore as the epitome of Mughal power. Similarly, the Delhi is metaphorically represented as the seat of central government headed by the mighty BJP–RSS

conglomeration. The Delhi was earlier an icon of “Muslim” Mughals, but now Delhi has become “Hindu”, operated by the RSS ecosystem along with the *Godi* (lap) media.

The music industry brought songs that openly celebrated the unity among the farmers of the two states with a special emphasis on the Jat–Jaat unity. A song sung by Navi Bawa and written by Davinder Gumti has put forward this thought clearly (Big Scene Records, 2021). The song talks about a situation of a family wherein a distressed elder brother calls the younger brother for his help. The younger brother rapidly came for the elder’s security, but Delhi (central government) has objections over the cordial reunion of the brothers.

Jatt Jaat ch fark na koi
Tak rooh meri gad gad hoi
There is no difference between *Jatt* and *Jaat*
I am delightful by looking at the union

Dhanda Nyoliwala, an overseas Haryanvi singer, penned down a song in favour of the unity among Rajasthan, UP, Haryana, and Punjab celebrating the united strength and display of resistance against the state. The song is especially significant as it is written in a mixture of Haryanvi and Punjabi languages. The video starts with a few comments by people from Punjab and Haryana talking about supporting each other against the BJP and Prime Minister Modi (FarArmy Productions, 2021). The song warns Delhi about its imminent fate as it is not far from the reach of the protesting farmers.

Jatt naal Jaat Dilli
Datde ta Daat Dilli
The Jaats are with the Jatts together in this battle
Stop them if you can.

Some of the songs had been massive hits among the farmers that had put across the thoughts of the protesters forcefully in the rhetorical battle going on with the combined force of the state, state-controlled media, and the ruling BJP–RSS political organisations. Many songs had come out regularly during the year-long protest that presented the protesters’ narrative among the Indian society. The songs were sung in Punjabi and Haryanvi languages, but to spread their word, the videos came along with lyrics written in Roman script at the bottom of the video. The visuals aided the emotions and thoughts, which the lyricist wanted to express. The songs functioned as the answer in the ongoing debate and issues involving the farmers’ protest. It not only successfully tackled the pro-corporate media houses but also established their version of politics in the hearts of millions of people. These songs grabbed millions of views on YouTube, surpassing all traditional means of

propaganda such as newspaper, magazines, posters, pamphlets, and political speeches. It is important here to note that the supporters of the farmers' protest had created a huge network of alternative media that played an even more important role than these songs. The YouTube channels in local languages proved to be the backbone of the protest, but it is not in the purview of this chapter to talk about that in detail.

The songs became a powerful medium to propagate the narrative across the globe. These songs were played at homes, in fields, at protest sites, in cars, in tractors, on phones, etc.

Kisan Anthem (Shree Brar, 2020) and Kisan Anthem 2 (Shree Brar, 2021) are the two songs that need to be discussed to understand the minds of the protesters. These songs are penned by Shree Brar and sung by a number of different singers from Punjab and one from Haryana as well, which shows the spirit of cooperation among the artists of both the states. They talk about various issues such as the unity of farmers, especially the Jats of various states, the mainstream news media, sentiments of Sikh religiosity, and posing faith in the leadership of union leaders. The songs functioned as a morale booster and called upon the people to keep their spirits high and organise in favour of the protest. One of the most surprising facts about the songs and music produced in Punjab during the period of protest is the sheer absence of the most famous icon of Punjab, Bhagat Singh. It seems that the youth of Punjab has moved decisively away from Bhagat Singh in favour of religious Punjabi icons such as Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh, and Hari Singh Nalwa. It is striking to find that the songs had strong religious content that talked about *kesari jhanda*, *pagg*, *kada*, *kirpan*, and *Nihangs* and visuals showing large religious congregations, but conspicuously Bhagat Singh has been forgotten conveniently. The elder farmers' union leaders did belong to the left ideology, but the youth has lost interest in Bhagat Singh: rather they remember the religious resistance put up by the Gurus as an inspiration to fight against the government.

The Kisan Anthem song lyrics can be summarised in a few lines as the Punjabi Jats have put the security barricades behind Swaraj tractors. The Indian media is sold out, but the protesters are featured prominently on British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The youth must wake from their slumber to participate in the protest happening in Delhi. The Jats are reaching Delhi in large numbers; they have put two trolleys behind one tractor. Delhi has been challenged by the Punjabi *Jats*. The youth is waiting peacefully for the time being, but they are ready for the action if advised by the elders.

Jatt nahio kalle, naal Jaat goriye, centre ch khadi kiti khaat goriye
Tangi aunde Jatt Billo jehde vi khangian, 2 percent aaleya ne laate langar
 The Jatts are not alone, the Jaats are also present with them, and they
 have established themselves firmly in the Delhi

The Jatts are giving befitting reply to all the opponents, even if the Sikhs are minority, they are feeding *langar* (free food) to all.

Kisan Anthem 2 song has mostly repeated sentiments except a significant few that needs to be pointed out here. The corporates are named here directly that are accused of being the main beneficiaries of the three farm laws. The media is targeted here again which chose to remain on the opposite side. This song has for the first time put UP prominently among the league of Haryana and Punjab in the farmers' protests, giving assurance to the UP farmers' leader Rakesh Tikait that he need not cry again because the other farmers are having his back. There is an emphasis on the Sikh–Hindu unity that salvages the Sikh protesters from the *Khalistani* terrorist tag the government and its favoured media were trying hard to press on the Punjabi protesters.

*Massan massan katthe hoye han, Up Haryana Dilliye, chhetti jande nahi
asin hath chhadke*

Keemat tan dass Dilliye, boli lawange Adaniyan ton wadhke

UP and Haryana have come together after much difficulty, Delhi! we are here to stay and support

We will bid more than Adanis (Gautam Adani corporation), just tell how much money you require Delhi.

Delhi

Delhi has remained the target of most of the songs because Delhi represents the centre of power since centuries. The Sikh religious history remembers Delhi as the citadel of the enemy that martyred Sikh leaders such as Guru Tegh Bahadur and Banda Singh Bahadur. The anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 added to the hatred towards Delhi; therefore, Delhi is blamed, challenged, and lamented in almost all the songs. The episode of Sikh forces breaching the Red Fort in 1783 under the leadership of Baghel Singh is triumphantly remembered as well (Johal, 2018).

However, the surprising element is the aping of the Punjabi psychology and sense of history by the Haryanvi music industry. The Punjabis have exerted great influence over the relatively very small music industry of Haryana. Delhi has always been part of Haryana historically and culturally. The people of Haryana have matrimonial relations with the villagers of Delhi since centuries, and it provides employment to a large number of Haryanvi population. Delhi is never seen as an enemy territory or foreign land by the Haryanvis, but the Punjabi psyche pushed its version of history so strongly that Haryana followed it uncritically. There are scores of Haryanvi songs that pit the Haryanvi peasant against Delhi, lending the poetic metaphors from Punjab (CK Nara, 2021).

The biggest hit that came out of Haryana was Ajay Hooda's song *Kisan versus Delhi* (Rangroot Records, 2020). The songs produced in Haryana were a bit lighter on criticism and avoided harsh words except a few. In comparison to the songs in Punjab that used controversial lyrics against Narendra Modi, the song by Ajay Hooda looks more like an appeal from a fan to Modi "ji" and used the term *thari* (yours) for him, which is actually used for persons more than one. Therefore, grammatically the term *thari* is incorrect, but the lyricist has emphasised the grandeur and respect for Prime Minister Modi by using it here. The songwriter has apologised to the prime minister after the song, where a message is flashed "Sorry Modi Ji, big fan of you, but firstly I belong to a farmer family". It is perhaps due to the higher acceptance of the cult of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Haryana than in Punjab that the singers avoided direct confrontation. Songs from UP, on the other hand, completely avoided any such reference or any major criticism of the prime minister or the government; rather, they blamed it on the system and absence of charismatic leaders like Charan Singh. Another interesting point is that Bhagat Singh features regularly in Haryanvi songs unlike in Punjabi songs. Ajay Hooda wrote that they do not dare to underestimate the farmers' strength as farmers have become Bhagat Singh.

*Sansad main tam baith kisan nai noch khage, Modi ji thari top kadai
hum Dilli aage*

Hoya kisan yo kattha sara, Jai ho jai ho Bhaichara

The politicians have killed the farmers mercilessly in the parliament

We have come to Delhi, dear Modi ji, where is your canon?

The peasants have now united, long live the brotherhood.

The other song that had captured the mood on the streets of Haryana was *Zindabad Jawani Zindabad Kisani* written by Ajay Hooda and sung by Arvind Jangid. Another attraction for the song as the female artist featured in the song is a well-known female singer of Punjab, Sonia Maan. The song seems to be inspired by many different Punjabi songs, but it beautifully communicates the thinking that had taken roots in the hearts of the common farmers of the state. The song states that the agriculture is Jats' ancestral identity since centuries, and they can die to defend it. The song insinuates about the danger of corporates grabbing the land of Jats, thus destroying the very basis of their identity, for which they are ready to sacrifice their lives. The farmer is warning the aggressor to not grab their land; otherwise, they are ready to sacrifice their lives. Haryana, UP, Rajasthan, and Punjab have come together to revert back the three black farming laws.

Fasal nasal pai baat jo aai, de dyange kurbani

Zindabad Jawani, Zindabad Kisani

We can sacrifice our lives for agriculture and ancestry

Long live the soldier, long live the farmer

We have talked about the Dhanda Nyoliwala's song 26 *Kisan* earlier as well, but the song needs to be discussed again in detail for it has exceptional clarity of thought and shows exemplary courage for not mincing words. This song has criticised the media's negative role along with exposing the RSS for the political role it played in the garb of an ultra-nationalist cultural organisation that was questioning the protesters' patriotism. Dhanda Nyoliwala warns Modi that he must not mistake them for Gandhi as they have the blood of Bhagat Singh flowing in their veins. The writer is signifying here that Bhagat Singh was also a Jat himself who had sowed pistol in his field with the intention of growing a crop of arms to use against the British colonisers. He questions the state's use of violence against its own citizens who not only produce food for the country but also provide soldiers for the army.

*Masla hukook ka hai, hal kar Modi, Shanti tai baithe han, Shanti
jai khodi
Gandhi nahi raga main hai Bhagat Singh ka khoon, jihnai faslan ki
jagah pai
bandook bhi thi bodi.*

There is a long poem in verse after the song is finished. It packs a strong message for the government that rattles all the ruling party's narrative against the protesters. The writer "orders" the prime minister rather than demanding a solution and reminds him the fate of dictators like Hitler and Gaddafi if he chooses to ignore the protesters. The business ethos of Gujarat is challenged by the martial character of the people of Haryana. The farmers are the real owners of their land, so the servitude of the corporates is not acceptable to them. The author ridicules the RSS by saying that the khaki nickers have done nothing for Kashmir, but it is the peasant soldiers of Haryana and Punjab who have sacrificed their lives in Kashmir for the integrity of the nation.

"Suna hai tere Gujarat ki hawa mein bhi vyapar hai, ye tab tak hai jab tak sarhado pe kisano ke beton ke hathon me hathiyar hai" (FarArmy Productions, 2021).

Bhajan and ragni network

The music industry of Haryana is miniscule in comparison to that of Punjab, but it has a wide network of folk singing known as *ragni*. There were very less high-budget YouTube songs produced in Haryana unlike in Punjab, but the traditional ecosystem of Haryanvi religious *bhajan* (religious songs) and *ragni* (Haryanvi folk) parties made up for that. Similarly, many female singers of UP and Haryana sung a number of *ragnis* and *bhajans* in favour of the peasants. These parties are active in the public all year round performing among the public, which are mostly females. Some of these performances and songs were recorded and uploaded on YouTube as well, which gives us the idea about the penetration and effectiveness of the movement in the public.

Vidhi Deshwal is a renowned *bhajan* singer of Haryana whose song *Bata mere yaar sudama re* was a phenomenal hit all across India. She sang a song called *MSP ka pakka kanoon* (Vidhi Deshwal Official, 2020), which is qualitatively far more intellectual in its content than other songs on YouTube that it gives an impression of a speech delivered by a farmers' union leader. The song written by Ramdhan Goswami does not talk about the protest but rather talks about implementing the law of MSP that can solve many issues for the farmer and his family. The correct prices of the crops can bring a revolution in the society which will have a dominos effect in the overall progress and upliftment of the society.

MSP ka pakka kanoon gorment ke hath bane,
Swaminathan report sath main lagoo ho to baat bane
 The government should create a law to provide MSP
 The Swaminathan report's recommendations shall be applied as well

Ragni

The *saang-ragni* folk music tradition of Haryana is based on the amalgamation of Persian *qissa*, Nathpanth, and local *kahani* traditions. The mythical and historical characters of medieval and modern periods have become the subjects of these *qissas* that are performed in front of the public like *Veer Vikarmajeet*, *Raja Harishchandar*, *Raja Mordhwaj*, *Heer Ranjha*, *Jyani Chor*, *Shahi Lakadhar*, *Mahabharat*, *Krishan Sudama*, *Nauratan*, *Narsi ka Bhat*, *Pingla Bhartari*, *Gopichand*, *Beeja Sorath*, *Seth Tarachand*, *Nal Damyanti*, *Jaimal Fatta*, *Chandarhas*, *Phoolsingh Nautanki*, and the modern ones include *Bhagat Singh*, *Subhash Chandra Bose*, *Harphool Jat*, and *Leelo Chaman*. There are many *ragnis* that are independent *ragnis* and not part of any particular *qissa*.

The *ragni* singing tradition was facing stagnancy and lack of creativity in the last few decades because no new *qissas* and *ragnis* are added to the canon that could capture the imagination of the contemporary time. The farmers' agitation has inspired a freshness and motivation to create new *ragnis* according to the emergent socio-political situation that the Haryanvi society is facing. There have been quite a few *ragnis* about the plight of the peasant and hardships of his life, but hundreds of new *ragnis* have been created in the time span of last one year. These new *ragnis* have used the traditional tropes that are already popular among the public.

One striking difference between the Punjabi and Haryanvi response to the challenge posed by the state is that the Punjab music industry has immersed in the religious heritage of Sikh martial traditions, whereas the Haryanvis have put their faith into the icon of Bhagat Singh and his legacy of fighting colonial atrocities. The Sikh response is inspired by the minority mentality in the face of a Hindu nationalist onslaught, but it is astonishing to note

that they have abandoned another Punjabi whose politics stood on left secular credentials. The Haryanvi protesters, mainly Jats, have no major problem with Hindutva, but it critiqued the BJP for its pro-corporate economic agenda. The Jats of Haryana despise the BJP for its alleged anti-Jat Punjabi businessmen constituency in Haryana that has deprived the Jats from the political dominance it traditionally enjoyed in the state.

A ragni sung by singer Naresh Sheoran at the toll plaza of Bastada in Haryana has taken inspiration from the famous ragni “*sau sau pade musibat beta mard jawan main*” from the *qissa* Bhagat Singh, wherein Bhagat Singh’s mother meets him in the jail and cheers him up to endure all the hardships with courage. The *ragni* at the toll plaza is about a mother who is calling upon his son to dedicate his life for the community and beat the “*rande*”, unmarried people signifying the Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Special Haryana, 2021).

Thaiye dande bhaje raande jaan bachane mai

Lago case chahe ho jya pesh beshak thane me

Give a beating to those unmarried people, they should run for their lives
Do not get afraid from the police and courts.

Another duet *ragni* known as “*ooprantali*” sung by the Naresh Sheoran and Deepa Chaudhary and written by Dilawar Singh Mehamiya is inspired from a famous *ragni* “*Chhutti ke din poore ho gaye*” of *qissa* of Chap Singh Somwati. In this *ragni* Somwati, the newly wed wife of Chap Singh is pleading him to not leave her to join his duty, but the *ragni* at the protest site gives a twist to the situation in which the wife is encouraging her husband to go for the protest without worrying about her and agricultural work. The husband and wife are having a conversation in this highly political *ragni* as it talks about the divisive politics of the BJP in the state and the betrayal of Devi Lal’s grandson Dushyant Chautala who joined the alliance government against the people’s mandate. Dushyant Chautala is not the rightful owner of peasant leader Devi Lal’s legacy. The special emphasis is on Dushyant Chautala as it was not expected from a Jat to side with the corporates and non-Jat chief minister and prime minister in the government. The wife is calling upon her husband to abort the land-grabbing bid by the Prime Minister Modi, Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar, and Deputy Chief Minister Dushyant Chautala through the three deceitful land laws. The husband must go to the protest to ensure fair prices for the crops (RK Ragni, 2021).

Dharne oopar ja soon gori, khet kyar nai tham liye (husband to wife)

Ghar ki chinta chhod piya ji, sahi fasal ke daam liye (wife to husband)

I am going on the protest site dear; take care of the agricultural work
Do not worry about the household dear, fight for the fair price of
the crops

Uttar Pradesh

Western UP is culturally an extension of Haryanvi culture that speaks a similar language and follows the same traditions. The western UP music industry is very small, but it has the same *ragni* and *bhajan* network that operates in Haryana. The songs created during the protest in UP were very less in number and lacked any political content and resolve to put resistance against the government. The songs mostly pity the condition of the farmer and express helplessness in dealing with the situation. UP writers remembered its erstwhile Jat leaders who could lead them in such a situation but lament at the situation in their absence.

The mega star of western UP, Uttam Kumar had sung a song “*Baat teri kaun sunaiga*” (Rajlaxmi Music, 2021) that was watched by millions of people but does not have impressive lyrics. It simply lacks the bite to attack the ruling dispensation or motivate the listeners to join the protest against the government. Former Chief Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh is remembered in almost all the songs of western UP as the messiah of the farmers of UP.

Na Chhotu Ram ib aane ka, na Baba Tikait samjhane ka
Na Chaudhary Charan Singh thamne, aage ki raah dikhane ka
 There is no Chhotu Ram, neither is Mahendra Singh Tikait
 Chaudhary Charan Singh is also not present among us to guide
 O! son of the soil, who will be take care of your worries

There are similar songs sung by many female *bhajan* singers of UP that have similar content as described earlier.

Conclusion

History provides us with the examples to understand that a communitarian solidarity with political consciousness and leadership is required to resist a powerful government. In the centre of the farmers’ mobilisations was a caste and historic identity of the peasantry of north-western regions of India. In recent history, the Jats in the region have moved towards unionisation within the democratic setup; however, they fall upon the socio-cultural organisation and kinsmen structures and develop a sense of brotherhood to meet the challenges.

A prominent feature of the protests was the active and key participation of musicians, artists, songmakers, and other cultural agencies emerging primarily from the same identities. The significant role played by the songwriters and singers from the region, primarily from the state of Punjab, draws attention towards the centrality of the agriculture and rural background in popular entertainment industry that was used for amplifying the farmers’ voice. These artists devoted their resources and work to stand in solidarity with the leadership of the farmers’ unions while being faced with police cases, raids, and harassment from several governmental agencies. The songs produced in

the course of the agitation rallied the youth from rural and non-rural backgrounds to participate in the protests from the very beginning.

This movement provided the mantra that a robust popular propaganda system must be created to politicise your followers, keep their spirits high, to mobilise, and most importantly counter the narrative of the ruling forces. The music created in support of the farmers' demands fulfilled this task to a great extent. The use of platforms such as YouTube and social media provided a massive reach to the artists across different states to reach to a large audience to encourage them to participate in the struggle and create solidarity networks worldwide. This is perhaps the single most significant cultural factor that kept the movement going and making it successful. The active use of social media and other digital platforms proved to be an important tool in the hands of the singers and artists to increase their reach and connection with the audience beyond physical borders and constraints. As an outcome, the coming together of singers and songmakers from different states provided an opportunity for developing socio-cultural fusion and interaction and a sense of brotherhood to meet the challenges. The uniqueness of this peasant movement lies in the fact they formed a larger unity this time transcending the cultural, religious, and linguistic barriers. The Punjabi Jats became the mainstay of the movement, drawing inspiration from their unique religious values and combining that with the caste affinity and pride. The Jats of Haryana, UP, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan reverberated the sentiments to make a formidable unity over a vast area for the first time in history. The songs of this movement clearly demarcated the basis of their unity as a fight for *fasl* (crop) and *nasl* (caste).³

Acknowledgement

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Notes

- 1 Jat and Baniya castes have antagonistic relations historically in Punjab due to economic conflicts arising out of their professions. A Baniya also known as *Lala*, *Karar*, *Sahukar* etc., used to provide credit to the peasants, which literally meant a vicious debt trap that ended up in confiscation of the farming land.
- 2 This particular historical understanding of the past suits Rakesh Tikait, who acquires the power from the traditional social organisation of *Khaps* popular among the Jats of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. This interpretation boosts his claim to be the natural leader of the Jats in all these states (for more on the *khaps'* participation in the farmers' protests, see Singh, 2022).
- 3 *Nasl* means race, but here it means caste.

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